

BOTTEGHE OSCURE

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LUCIEN SCHELER

LISIÈRES DU DEVENIR

Un dépassement du temps
où le temps perdu se retrouve.

ANDRÉ FRÉNAUD

I (Secrets de l'ombilic)

Sitôt éjectée de la gangue où de temps immémorial, aheurtée, cette graine de nuit s'apprêtait à feu doux, comme des linges purs dans la main du soleil les brises du matin séchèrent toutes souillures.

Des nerfs à l'épiderme fusent parfois quelques réminiscences de cet état premier: une cohésion orange virant en plénitude contestée, — sous l'emprise de la camisole et du masque la prescience de l'incommensurable, — les crispations, les détentes, les haltes, circonstances d'un cheminement qui triompha, poumons forcés jusqu'aux entrailles, par un bond qu'assurait le plus étroit passage.

II (Le temps s'élabore)

De l'épreuve d'unicité dans l'inclémence élémentaire et de la pieuvre d'angoisse à la gorge attachée qui, tout à trac, lâcha prise que reste-t-il? Parachuté d'un mont perdu, quoi pourrait désormais surprendre ce noyau d'exigence conscient de son autonomie! Isolationniste infailible à l'ouvrage, les

ombres mouvantes, jour après jour, composent l'univers où, livré à lui-même, — victime et bourreau, les blancs et les noirs, — il sèmera l'ortie du double jeu.

III (Le temps se découvre)

Éprouver l'étendue face au monde lumineux qui l'accueille, prendre ses repères de la place offerte au vent où le soleil le laissait interdit! Serait-il au bord des larmes qu'il rirait.

D'or et de mica des paillettes brasillent dans le gravier de l'allée; précoces châtaignes des hannetons, au vol rectiligne qu'interrompt la futaie, jonchent le sol.

IV (Le temps se réserve)

Au plus pressé, des enfants sautent les fossés, escaladent les haies: les hommes qu'ils tentent de rallier au loin franchissent les crêtes.

Sur la plaine, au bord des rivières, prématurées rampent les brumes de solitude, et germe de déraison, il ne tarde guère à rejoindre la cohorte de cris et de rires.

Ses forces croissent. La multitude l'environne.

A la rencontre des saisons, des paysages, il improvise, lui semble-t-il, le chant qui monte et qui s'exalte.

Le coude à coude l'emporte.

V (A contre-temps)

L'amateur de nuées debout sur une cime brassait au petit jour leurs masses fraîches et impalpables. Il agissait comme le geindre qui arrache la pâte du pétrin et, troublés, ces fantômes inconstants déposaient sur son corps par myriades les gouttelettes d'une semence éblouissante, étincelles de l'aube où sa joie se mirait.

VI (Le temps s'accuse)

Un plateau rocheux apparemment pavé de calebasses où pousse, au vent livrée, une herbe rase et grise, image de la foule qu'il contemple, tel un chef cimbre hissé sur les épaules des soldats.

Qu'est-il au juste? Le moyeu d'une roue, la pointe d'un bouclier, d'un bouclier aux effigies marquées de flétrissure.

VII (Le temps dérive)

« Je gravis sans effort les falaises de l'air et le vent de l'été me soutient dans sa paume.

« Blanche, rose, teintée d'aurore, c'est toi la poursuivie dont je vais me saisir, ô nue, céleste nue que j'admire le jour, que j'invoque la nuit. En vain tu te dérobes et penses m'échapper, je te modèlerai au gré de mon désir.

« Prends garde à l'épervier quand il plane au zénith! Une flèche de feu a jailli de mes mains, les défilés du ciel grondent, la terre oscille, nous ne formons plus qu'un!

« ... Toute douceur succède à toute véhémence et les sillons sous la pluie tiède reverdissent. »

VIII (Logique du temps)

Harcelé l'homme qui le précède fuit sans reprendre haleine et l'homme qui le suit hante sa foulée; ainsi le chien courant et la proie se confondent. Pourraient-ils se livrer à quelque demi-tour les destinées resteraient inchangées.

IX (Nuit de la sédition)

Comprenne qui pourra l'unité innommée — comme au fond du miroir un chagrin se révèle — à l'oeuvre d'une création seconde les éléments voués au crépuscule.

.

Herses et pieux au long des berges les roseaux noirs se dressent. L'intensité du feu inaccessible à l'horizon décroît et les présages se concrétisent. En bordure du chemin de halage, de l'écorce des peupliers et des saules, de la carapace du sol argileux, des écailles du fleuve, de la pulpe des nuées transsude peu à peu l'âme vert de grisée d'un désir identique. La lymphe des végétaux, le sang des pierres distillés l'austérité se substitue au lyrisme caduc. Contre la forme et l'attitude interviennent les monolithes. Dénudé le silex vibre sous l'aile des noctules et dans une auréole violette s'inscrit la face guillotinée.

X (Le temps s'exerce)

Au sur place dans la marche il eut mesuré la durée, mais l'en-avant inéluctable se poursuit. Sur le parcours du cap qu'il découvre la foule semble un fleuve opprimé remontant à sa source et rongé par ses rives. Des falaises parvient le tournoiement des cris.

Où la honte? Où la rage? Où la révolte? Rien.

XI (Saute de temps)

Le sang circule dans la pierre, le sang de l'homme dans la pierre, de mur en mur, de pavé en pavé, le sang de l'hôpital et le sang de l'asile, lent comme les supplices.

Le sang circule dans la pierre, le sang de la putain et le sang de la brute, provoquant et soumis comme les oriflammes.

Le sang circule dans la pierre, le sang de Belleville et celui de Plaisance, véhément comme le vin bleu, fraternel comme l'églantine. Le sang de l'homme dans la pierre, le sang de Delescluze et le sang de Varlin. Le sang circule dans la pierre, le sang de l'homme dans la pierre, — le fleuve est un sarment que l'incendie consume, les casernes des torches.

XII (La roue du temps)

Le cap s'amenuisa au point de n'être qu'une bande longue de terre aride de la largeur d'une jetée, — une jetée

sans garde-fou, — réduite peu à peu sous l'incessante usure à l'état d'une route inégale et bossuée qu'une charrette occuperait tout entière. Route à son tour si exigüe qu'il ne fut plus possible de la qualifier que chemin; chemin sans ornières qui s'acheva par un sentier de crête. Ainsi les bords du gouffre tendaient à se rejoindre, non pas à l'infini, la réduction de la surface dite portante, dont sur le plan de la durée une similitude était la conséquence, se révélant, lieue après lieue, plus inquiétante à chacun des survivants; des survivants, — petits kangourous! — que de nouveaux venus talonnaient sans répit.

— Petits kangourous ne dissimulez pas votre tête dans la poche d'un ami, efforcez-vous plutôt de retarder la marche, retournez-vous, mettez à l'oeuvre vos incisives de rongeur, mordez vos poursuivants dans le dur des mollets infatigables, tranchez leur le tendon, que diable! —

Beaucoup, soit qu'ils fussent pris de faiblesse, soit qu'ils heurtassent un obstacle caché ou qu'un voisin trop à l'étroit traîtreusement ne les saignât, disparaissaient sans plus laisser de traces que la grenaille perdue à la poursuite des courlis. Quant aux autres, sur un terrain en fer de lance, tôt ou tard, le vide se chargeait d'eux!

— Petits kangourous, l'avenir sur votre rétine son image elle est indélébile! L'éclat de l'évidence se moque pas mal, — qu'en dites-vous? — de la double membrane des paupières et du réticule porte-bagage! Hérissée de papilles rosâtres votre langue prend des reflets d'acier bruni, on dirait une truite ocellée qui se pâme hors du trou, petits kangourous! —

Isolément, à deux, par cordées ou par grappes, la chute les restitue aux rigueurs des abysses et l'aigle qui se gouverne les observe livrés aux saillies rocheuses sur la dernière desquelles ils s'abandonnent comme des araignées de mer que le pêcheur fracasse contre un plat-bord, ou, s'ils tombent d'un surplomb, à l'approche vociférante du point d'impact, freinant sans grâce sur l'ultime perpendiculaire, l'idéale.

— Hé! petits kangourous, y êtes-vous? Coucou! —

XIII (Nuit pleine)

*Appels fourvoyés
 enlacements sans prises
 agonie constante.
 Pas de centre
 pas de parois
 pas de colonne.
 Dérobés l'un à l'autre
 un phantasme
 d'entre chien et loup
 un témoin inerte.
 A retordre l'envers
 à fendre les côtés
 par tranches l'épaisseur
 et la sueur de la face comme une laque.
 Au sud un grossissement de gravats.
 Lovés de cernes
 en plongée les yeux contemplent
 pour quel aveu
 les poings au sol.*

XIV (Les vigiles du temps)

*Ils vont par petits groupes espacés et qui d'être traqués
 n'ont plus à craindre. Mais la falaise haute, l'espace éblouis-
 sant offusquent les uns, le vertige les prend; d'autres le vent
 qui tourmente le faite comme feurre les disperse.*

XV (Le temps se démet)

*Sur la ligne de partage des abandons tendue comme
 une hart, luisante comme un tranchant de couperet, s'avance
 un funambule. Plus que la prudence ou la fatigue les ronces
 de la mémoire retardent sa marche et que lui servirait d'im-
 portuner ces quelques-uns en file indienne devant lui! Le
 paysage prédateur le laisse indifférent. Étoile des années
 nues, la raison poétique éclaire le no man's land.*

XVI (Au grand jour)

Sur l'horizon ce ne sont plus des burgs ni des villes en ruines qui dérivent, mais des temples, des mausolées aux sveltes colonnades. N'est-il pas engagé dans une voie appienne où croissent d'immenses reines-marguerites multicolores, des tubéreuses, des centaurées, la véronique des bois, le sceau de Salomon et la couronne impériale, des fleurs de jalousie, la violette des sorciers, le girofler des rivages, l'herbe à la Trinité, l'iris de Suze, le lis de Chalcédoine et l'herbe impatiente? Toutes s'inclinent, toutes lui souhaitent la bienvenue.

XVII (Rémanence)

Flamme des justifiés vous brûlez pure et calme à l'entrée de l'Erèbe.

Le vent se souviendra du secret des garigues, au large il redira l'hégémonie des sables et l'oiseau migrateur lui confiera son cri.

Ici nul ne déçoit. Nul ne porte de masque.

Au delà des écartellements, de la soif, du rêve, de la ferveur, dans les ramures du renoncement, l'abîme le délivre comme une aile.

RENÉ CAZELLES

UNE FOIS

Avril semait son écume de verdure. L'eau redevenue libre ruisselait sur les rameaux et les bêtes encore inachevés. Ce n'était pas une saison nouvelle qui s'offrait à nous, mais la face douce et craquante du temps dont nous devenions la proie et les complices.

Ainsi nous marchions sous l'arche glorieuse de l'astre. Je tenais dans mes mains la chaleur de ton corps et devant moi se brisait le choc de nos âmes ossifiées devenu murmure. Lequel de nous deux aurait pu dire à l'autre que la peur ne nous avait pas quittés? La laideur quotidienne avait fui, l'amas des désirs ne pouvait plus nous tromper. Passée la frange confuse des eaux basses, se découvrirait à nous la délirante immensité que rien n'autorise, et nous n'allions plus être, là-bas, que deux points d'or minuscules parmi les nuées rapides du couchant.

NE PLUS VIVRE HUMILIÉ

L'haleine se faisait givre sur le carreau jamais traversé, jours après jours, le souffle coupé, le verbe trahi. Fourré de vase et de roseaux acérés. Chant de guerre. Rougeur qui s'élance, qui plane et bouillonne, qui frissonne et sombre déjà. Depuis, tu as appris, frère, que la permanence du néant délivre. N'écoute plus battre cette

porte sous l'aigre vent des carrières. Détourne-toi du sceptre désagréé qui règne sur la surface de l'arène. Tes mains sont lisses comme les cailloux que les enfants volent aux rivières, ton pur visage jailli du large sein maternel et c'est ton coeur l'étoile pourpre des matières qui danse avant de se fondre dans un soleil toujours enfant. Il n'y a rien à promettre et il n'y a rien à dire. Il y a simplement ta vie lancée pour une durée, plus haute que le temps quoiqu'aussi brève que l'éclair.

LES MÉMOIRES DU PAUVRE

*Mon père, prenez-moi par la main.
Je suis parti, mais ce n'était pas pour vous tromper.
La pluie creusait le seuil de votre maison,
Le jardin et le chien s'en allaient à l'abandon.
Je n'aurais pas su vieillir sous l'arbre désert,
Je n'aurais pas pu grandir sans être fidèle.
Mon père, donnez-moi votre main.
Le vent toujours triomphe de l'étoile,
toujours les nuées échappent aux forêts,
La mer est une longue nappe blanche,
où tous les orages s'avancent ensemble
pour ne faire qu'un seul éclair de beauté.*

*Ah! vous qui ne couchez jamais dehors,
vous dont le pain durcit sur la table, craignez de
n'embrasser qu'un vieux nuage.*

*Oiseaux, qui nagez dans les herbes du matin,
Libellules qui dansez sur le vide des fontaines,
poissons des cascades, la terre vous est légère
qui vous sourit, la terre qui nous massacre et
nous réconcilie.*

*Le désespoir n'a pas de tête, ni le temps qui nous
creuse. Opposons-leur notre ombre radieuse, bord à
bord nous ferons le tour de la fête.*

Non, mon amie, cette planète que nous avons mise en marche ne s'arrêtera plus et quand, raidis, à bout de souffle, nous toucherons le fond tout sera prêt à recommencer.

A QUI JE CROIS

Elle émerge du néant.

Muqueuse de la vie, puissance minérale qui nous transit. Ses grands yeux doux et terribles se tournent vers nous. Et derrière eux pousse et gémit cet autre monde aussi réel que nos soleils et nos songes.

Sera-ce vraiment toujours le printemps sur sa face et ce bleu pur jailli des écartements de la matière?

O grande larve, la toute féconde, je baise ton coeur, je baise tes lèvres écrasées, toi, prostituée quoique providentiellement vierge.

Nous sommes tes enfants sans lumière, flèche et cible à la fois, tristes voleurs de feu que le mal désaltère. Jamais d'évasion, jamais de montée. Seule est divine, là-bas, l'onde prestigieuse que nous avons éveillée.

Ma liberté, une écaille. Mon espérance une explosion. Mais que ensemble de toutes les questions, sous l'amas des planètes, perce le nominateur simple, que baigne la grande fatigue heureuse du bâtisseur et je sais maintenant que les êtres s'incorporent ou se détruisent.

PHILIPPE JACCOTTET

LA POURSUITE DU RÉEL

RECHERCHES

... J'ai essayé un jour, imprudemment, de m'approcher d'un lit d'hôpital où un homme perdait ses chances de vivre à mesure que grandissait sur son oreiller une tache de sang, et d'opposer à cet accroissement horrible les battements d'aile de l'éternité entrevue par les saints; puis, déchiré entre ces deux abîmes, épuisé par leur contradiction insoutenable, j'ai ouvert brusquement la porte de ma maison, d'une maison que j'avais habitée enfant dans la montagne, et quelque chose m'a été donné soudain qui était presque un poème, et presque le bonheur. Voilà ce à quoi je reviens toujours en fin de compte comme à la vérité la moins incertaine: soit que j'aie essayé de voler plus haut que je ne puis, soit que j'aie fait effort pour fixer mon attention sur le point le plus bas, cette espèce de trou, d'entrée des enfers où ruissellent, mêlés, le sang et le lait, il faut que je retrouve ma patrie, qui est un sol d'où monte, pareil à une plante, le chant poétique. Je crois vraiment pouvoir affronter maintenant sans faiblir les mille opinions divergentes qui ont cours sur la poésie, même sachant que des esprits infiniment plus subtils et mieux informés que le mien sont là pour les défendre. Car je me soucie moins de connaissance que de ne pas être enterré vivant comme tant d'autres. J'ai erré longtemps, j'erre encore, il me paraît douteux que je cesse jamais d'errer; au moment où je pensais avoir découvert ou seulement entrevu une direction, accourait

une espèce de brume qui me la voilait. Il m'a semblé ainsi que la vérité était à la fois cette errance et ces brumes inséparablement liées, non pas l'une ou les autres; qu'elle était cette multiplicité insensée en apparence. Réelles, certes, les fautes, les bassesses, les atrocités; réelles les caresses, et réel ce mélange désespérant, révoltant, de jouissance et de dégoût. Mais quelles que soient les brumes et les éclaircies entre les brumes, si proches que paraissent les dangers, si effrayante l'irrésistible usure des corps, il y a quelque chose qui ne m'a jamais abandonné, et c'est cela que je veux essayer de décrire maintenant un peu autrement que je ne l'avais fait jusqu'ici: une espèce de rythme, l'observation d'une *mesure* indubitable et pourtant lointaine, une musique (mais ce mot, et plus encore celui d'*harmonie* que je pourrais aussi songer à utiliser, évoque pour nous quelque chose de fade, déjà il me semble voir quelque allégorie peinte au plafond d'un Opéra); il faut bien dire rythme, il faut bien parler de *mesure*, parce que cela peut être à la fois une ordonnance du temps et de l'espace, parce que cela comporte l'idée d'une règle, d'une certaine sévérité par conséquent, et aussi l'idée d'une sagesse, proche de la modestie. Souvent, comme tout le monde, j'ai été bien près de désespérer, mais en dessous, peut-être en deçà plutôt qu'au delà des brumes et des lueurs alternées, si j'avais réussi à me défaire des théories, du savoir, de l'assurance qu'ils nous prêtent, enfin de tout ce qui nous protège, nous enferme et nous ferme, je percevais de nouveau sans qu'aucun doute demeurât possible cette espèce de profond battement, aussi difficile à décrire qu'impossible à contester, ce roulement d'un bas tambour invisible ou simplement cette respiration d'être endormi, choses étranges et d'une certaine manière toutes proches, lois devenues souffle ou mélodie, commandements mués en constellations au fond des forêts, et tout cela est encore une approximation trop particulière, à la fois trop précise et trop frêle; je devrais dire (oui, il faut que je parle en toute liberté, exactement comme j'en ai envie et sans me soucier un instant des objections): le pas d'un dieu, la respiration d'un dieu entendus dans un moment de grand silence intérieur, aussi bien au centre d'une nuit de tempête que sur le seuil de l'aube la plus limpide, aussi bien dans l'horreur, l'égarement, qu'au cours d'une halte pleine de ra-

vissement; et si je dis cela, qu'est-ce que cela signifie? Puis-je en dire plus, ou dois-je me borner là? Cela signifie que se révèle à moi, sans autre caution, sans autre preuve que mon bonheur et la force que j'y puise, quelque chose qui a été appelé Dieu depuis toujours; mais non pas une Puissance de la nature, non pas un monstre, non pas la Raison, non pas Zeus ou Jehovah ou Allah, non pas le Christ ou Bouddha; pas davantage l'Ame du Monde, l'Humanité, l'Avenir... Mais *cela*, pour être détaché de toute histoire et de tout lieu, n'en est pas moins, n'en est que plus irrésistible, présent et fort: In saisissable plus certain en un sens que tout ce que l'on pourrait saisir... Insituable partout présent...

Et de même qu'à un certain ensemble de circonstances dans le ciel ne peut manquer de répondre l'éclair, à un autre la pluie: à ce lointain passage, à ce profond pas qui semble ordonner souverainement le monde autour de lui, à cette espèce de suspens vibrant et sourdement sonore pendant lequel le monde se change en une maison dont les ombres mêmes sont pleines de rires, répond en moi un calme ardent, attentif, bienheureux. J'ai envie de parler, peut-être sans savoir pourquoi, peut-être parce que je sens que j'ai touché la merveille, et qu'il me faut le dire aux autres pour qu'ils ne désespèrent plus; mais je ne peux parler n'importe comment. Il ne s'agit plus d'un résultat à atteindre, d'un objet à acquérir, d'une explication à donner, et le langage commun ne suffira pas; ma raison n'a pas été seule touchée, mais tout mon être comme enveloppé, baigné ou pénétré, ébranlé serait mieux dire, et comme envahi des pieds à la tête par une poussée de bonheur; non pas emporté par l'ivresse, jeté dans le désordre: rendu à l'ordre, à l'ordre qui chante dans les proportions et la convenance, non pas à l'ordre des armées. Je n'ai pas été davantage arraché à moi-même, entraîné dans une absence éblouissante ou embrumée; mais rassemblé, rapproché du réel, à la fois plus dense et grandi. Je ne puis avoir là-dessus aucun doute: j'ai gagné au change, et toute une vie dans cet état serait d'une intensité inouïe, peut-être insoutenable.

C'est de tout cela qu'il me faut d'un coup rendre compte: non pas en reniant la raison, mais en l'enveloppant dans l'émotion de tout mon être, dans cette espèce d'ardeur ferme et calme où de nouveaux rapports m'ont paru s'établir entre les choses, ainsi qu'entre le monde et moi. J'aimerais qu'on ne dît pas: c'était un instant « mystique », simplement parce qu'aujourd'hui le mot *mystique* (à tort ou à raison, peu m'importe ici) évoque un refus du réel, une évasion hors du monde. En fait, je suis sûr que ce n'est rien de ce que pourraient essayer de définir des termes abstraits comme mysticisme, panthéisme, paganisme, termes qui, du seul fait d'être abstraits, trahissent l'actualité, la vigueur, la fraîcheur de l'expérience. Il ne s'agit pas pour moi d'analyser cette expérience; mais de la refaire en parlant, dans un état où la conscience claire et des mouvements plus sourds s'allient pour le choix des mots. Immanquablement en tous cas, et comme en premier lieu, ces mots chantent: c'est leur première obligation. Au rythme que j'ai perçu répond nécessairement ce rythme du vers, et sans doute y répond-il selon ma nature, selon les dispositions de mon oreille intérieure: le pas que j'ai entendu était lent, solennel, non pas d'une solennité de parade mais par la gravité de la marche, quelquefois hésitant jusqu'à broncher comme s'il y avait plus d'un obstacle à surmonter sur sa route, ou quelquefois comme si la route même manquait. Sa cadence, quoique régulière, n'était pas mécaniquement déterminée, mais souple, discrète comme les lois qui régissent le mouvement des branchages ou des sables. Et si maintenant, pour plus de précision encore, je me risque à comparer ce sourd battement, ce pas léger de l'Insaissable et cette belle ordonnance à ce qui aurait pu me parvenir d'une fête ou cérémonie très lointaine, je dirai que je n'entendais pas des fanfares, ni des clameurs, ni des stridences, pas plus que je n'aurais imaginé un spectacle rutilant (toujours sans doute à cause de mes dispositions personnelles, d'une certaine longueur d'ondes, d'une sensibilité plus vive à certaines fréquences); les sonorités, comme la cadence, étaient plutôt graves, ou alors d'une légèreté noble et poignante, les colorations d'une richesse éteintes, paraissant amassées dans l'épaisseur plutôt qu'étalées en surface: d'abord toutes les teintes des choses naturelles, feuillages, plantes, écorces, terre, rocher;

puis comme des vêtements de paysans, usés par le travail, ou des costumes royaux conservés dans des vitrines ou des coffres, le temps et la poussière du temps ayant voilé leur splendeur, leur orgueil; et si des drapeaux passaient au fond de ce théâtre de rochers et d'arbres, ils étaient eux aussi délavés, avec des bleus de ciels blanchis par la chaleur d'août, des rouges de vieux sang ou de roses fanées, comme j'en avais vu flotter au-dessus d'une foule noire, place de la Concorde, dans le froid, pour les funérailles de Léon Blum. Quelquefois, cependant, pouvait retentir aussi comme du fond d'un haut plateau ou à travers d'immenses distances marines le beuglement prolongé d'une trompe, d'une corne presque funèbre; ou une subite stridulation de flûte suraiguë, comme pour annoncer l'approche d'une épidémie dans une cité perdue au milieu des sables: quelques éclairs, quelques éclats d'épée dans ce paysage d'une tranquillité grave, à la fois monumental et secret.

Disant cela, recourant à ces quelques images illogiques pour essayer de préciser la nature de mon expérience, j'ai distrait l'attention, peut-être, de son caractère le plus souvent purement intime. Parler de dieux, de cortège, de cérémonie, c'était presque trop déjà: le plus souvent, en fait, il n'y avait rien que le monde visible, moi et les miens réunis dans cette ordonnance, éclairés, ennoblis, fortifiés par elle. Pas d'éléments saugrenus, extraordinaires ou fantasmagoriques: nous simplement, dans notre maison, notre village, dans le cours peu bruyant de notre vie; ternes, menacés, chancelants, mais établis soudain dans ce mouvement immense et merveilleusement réglé, reliés à un buisson de fleurs en même temps qu'à d'imperceptibles cimes; reliés du même coup aux vrais biens, aux vraies peines des autres, et surtout mis en place, situés, soumis à une géométrie indéchiffrable et très puissante. Vraiment, ce n'était pas de renverser l'ordre des apparences que j'avais besoin, ni de rien bouleverser, ni même d'inventer; la mesure, la mesure salubre, curatrice, illuminante, m'avait été soufflée en un moment peut-être fort banal, n'importe où, comme je marchais au bord d'un champ ou comme je travaillais dans le jardin ou m'éveillant en pleine nuit, et il suffisait que je la rendisse sensible à mon tour, à la manière de quelqu'un qui écarte le rideau d'une fenêtre pour qu'on puisse mieux distinguer le dehors.

Toutefois, ces bannières déchirées, ces armures ternies, ces ors (et l'écho affaibli d'un grand tambour, le son d'une trompe à travers des brumes), ces images plus riches, plus colorées, plus puissantes que j'ai évoquées demeureraient possibles, à certains moments, à l'arrière-plan des scènes et accessoires personnels, pour rendre compte totalement de l'expérience faite. A la condition que je n'oublie jamais de les maintenir lointaines et voilées par la distance, elles représentaient tout ce qui, autrefois, avait exprimé ou célébré ce passage, ce pas des dieux, quand on pouvait l'évoquer sans détours, avec splendeur et bruit, mon dernier lien avec autrefois, un souvenir et peut-être un fondement. L'essentiel étant que je n'essayasse pas de restaurer ces cérémonies ni de rebâtir ces temples dans mes vers, ce qui aurait été trahir une expérience dont quelques-uns des aspects essentiels étaient la fragilité et l'obscurité, le manque d'appuis, la solitude, une ombre de crainte sur la joie.

Dans ce domaine obscur, on voit que je m'appuie tantôt sur l'expérience elle-même, tantôt sur sa « répétition » en poésie, pour essayer de préciser l'idée que je me fais de l'une et de l'autre, ainsi que de leurs rapports. On voit aussi que j'en arrive à considérer tout poème comme l'expression, l'émanation plus ou moins naturelle, ou la reprise plus ou moins volontaire d'une expérience qui ne pourrait s'exprimer en dehors de lui. Si donc j'ai osé dire de ces instants qu'ils étaient le passage d'un dieu, je devrai prétendre que le poème est l'écho, la relation, la constatation (quelquefois l'éloge) du passage d'un dieu, le « passage d'un dieu dans la parole » ! Contrairement à beaucoup de critiques et de poètes aujourd'hui, j'ai quelque gêne à écrire ces mots-là ; d'abord, évidemment, parce que neuf fois sur dix le poème ne relate que le passage d'un poète (souvent niais, bêlant, ou arrogant), et que seuls de très rares textes... Ensuite parce que, même dans ce cas-là, j'ai l'impression de faire du poète une sorte de prêtre ou de magicien, alors que les choses doivent être à la fois beaucoup plus simples et beaucoup plus secrètes. Il faudrait donc corriger encore la formule, par exemple d'abord renoncer au mot « dieu », et chercher à reprendre l'observation de ce qui se passe, de ce qui passe.

J'ai dit déjà, en parlant de ce « dieu », que je ne pensais à aucun visage de dieu nommé, ni à aucune personne; j'ajoute qu'il ne s'agit pas davantage d'un quelconque sentiment humain, amour, compassion, colère, élevé à un plus haut degré ou seulement agrandi; ni d'une présence d'ordre surnaturel. Il faudrait plutôt, pour être véridique, sinon clair, associer deux notions qui nous semblent incompatibles: la vie et l'ordre, la vie et la perfection ou l'absolu. Par *vie*, nous entendons volontiers un jaillissement incontrôlé, une puissance quelquefois sauvage, comportant blessures et dangers; tandis que la perfection nous paraît confiner à l'immobilité de la mort. Or il nous est proposé de concevoir maintenant une puissance inépuisable et cependant sans excès ni débordements, une perfection qui vibre, un ordre qui respire: éternel peut-être, car chaque fois qu'on l'a perçu il était également frais, vif et nouveau, *éternellement jaillissant* (voilà bien ce qui nous paraît inconcevable dans cette expérience, mais au fond tout nous y est inconcevable et néanmoins, d'une certaine manière, saisissable). Cet ordre semble échapper au temps mais ne pas se figer, *comme une première rencontre qui ménagerait éternellement la surprise, l'émerveillement de la première rencontre*; une unité qui ne serait pas l'abolition des richesses du multiple, mais leur concentration en un point, et c'est pourquoi nous parlons aussi quelquefois d'un centre dont nous nous serions approchés, avec le sentiment très net qu'en nous en approchant nous n'avons rien perdu de la réalité, tout au contraire.

Je ne fais ici, qu'on veuille bien me croire, ni théologie, ni métaphysique: j'en serais incapable. J'essaie honnêtement de savoir de quoi se nourrit le poème, quelle est la nature de ce rythme sans lequel il ne se formerait pas. Et je sais que l'expérience, pour être mystérieuse, n'en est pas moins commune (fréquente au point qu'on oublie de s'en soucier). Ce qui n'est pas commun, c'est que le poème lui soit fidèle et sache en propager la contagion...

Il faut ajouter encore autre chose, qu'exprimaient déjà les mots choisis: *rythme, mesure, battement* ou pas, si insuf-

fisants qu'ils pussent être. Ce avec quoi nous entrons en contact à l'origine du poème n'est pas précisément un infini (de lumière, de puissance ou de bonheur), et cela aussi est curieux; nous devons admettre à la fois qu'il n'y a plus de limites infranchissables (en tous cas plus de murs, de barrières, d'écrans), et qu'il ne s'agit pas de l'illimité, de l'informe, du vide; nous sommes amenés à considérer une forme ouverte de toutes parts et qui n'en demeure pas moins forme, un infini architecturé, rien de démesuré précisément ou même d'incommensurable. Nouvelle contradiction, nouvelle absurdité peut-être, et pourtant c'est elle seule qui rend compte de l'expérience, lorsque j'essaie de la cerner une fois de plus.

Je n'ai pas appelé le poème, je ne l'ai pas même nécessairement attendu; peut-être vaut-il mieux que je n'y aie plus pensé, que j'aie oublié ou douté que j'étais poète. Je crois bien, même, qu'à un certain moment tout cela m'a paru ignoble, grotesque, criminellement frivole et vain. J'aurais voulu m'engloutir, au moins me détourner et ne plus voir ce que les hommes font de leur vie, de leur monde, des autres hommes. En particulier, j'aurais souhaité ne plus voir apparaître déjà, dans les traits de certains enfants pourtant très jeunes, le mélange de bêtise et d'assurance qui m'effrayait chez leurs pères. J'avais compris aussi une chose: que sans sortir du bourg où je vivais, un bourg d'un millier d'habitants nullement misérable, d'apparence somme toute paisible et presque heureuse, j'aurais pu, à raconter seulement quelques épisodes véridiques, (mais je n'en avais pas vraiment envie) composer une longue histoire de la tristesse, de la déchéance, de l'ennui. Ah! les réserves de chagrin que je devinais au fond des maisons! Il y a eu des progressistes de telle ou telle variété pour me reprocher ma vie à la campagne, à l'abri des « beautés naturelles »: comme si l'histoire de mon voisin ne me suffisait pas pour savoir presque tout de la douleur! Mais c'est souvent dans ces moments-là, dans une espèce de nausée intérieure, ou d'irritation, ou d'épuisement, qu'un changement se produisait, avec une singulière brusquerie; et silencieusement, sourdement, irrésisti-

blement, j'étais comme tiré en arrière, et la mesure merveilleuse m'était rendue: directement, sans médiateurs, comme un lointain tout proche: ordre libre, vie ordonnée, puissance sans violence, richesse sans arrogance, éternité fraîche... Vraiment, c'était comme si le monde de nouveau, sur toute son étendue, se changeait en un chant.

Il faut aller jusqu'au bout de ces constatations et, sans trop redouter de dire des sottises, résumer ce que nous avons appris de ce centre d'où naît le chant, de cette mesure qui le rythme, quitte à revenir plus tard sur d'autres aspects de l'expérience. Ce lieu (parlons ainsi bien qu'il ne s'agisse pas d'un lieu), ce lieu où les contradictions ni ne s'abolissent, ni ne s'exaspèrent, mais s'accordent en demeurant elles-mêmes, ce point qu'il n'est pas possible de penser vraiment est aussi le point de la réalité la plus forte, la plus dense. Autrement dit, voici ce que nous avons éprouvé: que nous n'étions jamais plus vivants, plus réels, plus certains de notre réalité et de la réalité du monde que lorsque nous atteignons ce point où notre pensée s'arrête, lorsque nous atteignait, plutôt, ce lieu impossible. Oui, la seule chose qui résistât au doute, au désespoir, pour nous, il fallait que ce fût l'incompréhensible, une énigme essentiellement énigme, c'est-à-dire indéchiffrable, mais qui nous apparaissait plutôt, en fin de compte, comme la seule ouverture, la seule porte, la seule vraie source (autre et ultime contradiction, qui voulait que l'issue fût justement l'infranchissable): éternité jaillissante, désaltérante, vivifiante...

Une fois admis le lien, fût-il très frêle, de la poésie avec ce mystère, il me semble qu'on ne s'étonnerait plus de certaines destinées: Baudelaire, Hölderlin entre autres, si sombres et si éblouissantes à la fois...

INTERVENTION D'UN TROUBLE-FÊTE

— Que tout cela est bien dit, noblement pensé! Et que ces propos vont loin!

— Vous avez raison de vous moquer. D'ailleurs, je ne vous avais pas attendu pour le faire: les grands élans, les

grandes pensées, et surtout ce que je ne cesse de me reprocher, ce style coulant, cette fluidité qui a si vite fait d'avaler les obstacles, cette dangereuse musique qui vous entraîne si discrètement de la vérité au mensonge, tout cela me gêne, me contrarie. Je voudrais une beauté plus ferme, plus sèche, plus ossue. Elle m'échappe, et je continue à me bercer de mots.

— Si vous étiez plus humble, vous sauriez vous en tenir à l'immédiat.

— Je crois savoir à peu près ce qu'il me faut éviter et ce qui me satisfait presque. Observer le monde en savant, noter la forme d'un pétale, les manoeuvres d'un insecte: je manque de patience, et je sens obscurément que ce n'est pas tout à fait cela qui est nécessaire; raconter une vie, une scène, dessiner des portraits, comme je crois que je pourrais le faire maintenant que je vis depuis quelques années dans ce bourg, me lasse d'avance, comme si c'était, dans le sens musilien de l'expression, « toujours la même histoire », trop imparfaite, trop morne, désespérante. Quant à méditer comme j'ai voulu le faire ici...

— Méditer est un bien grand mot...

— Mettons réfléchir, chercher à voir clair dans un désordre d'hypothèses ou d'impressions, qu'en dirai-je? En un sens, cela ne me paraît pas inutile: quelques lueurs vraies m'ont été données, peut-être, par ces recherches; mais elles me laissent aussi un sentiment de gêne, comme si elles étaient insuffisantes ou, par quelque côté, mensongères, artificielles. C'est un sentiment, rien de plus, et il faudrait le justifier.

— Essayez donc: ce ne sera pas difficile!

— Vous savez dans quel monde nous vivons: jamais la parole n'a été plus maltraitée qu'aujourd'hui. Avant de périr par la faute de telles ou telles radiations, nous aurons péri dans un déluge de paroles immondes où le faux ne se distingue plus du vrai. Ainsi prolifère l'informe. La seule réponse à cela, à mon sens, est presque désespérée. Imaginez une table de jeu où dix joueurs malhonnêtes gagneraient à peu près constamment contre un seul qui respecterait les règles, et préférerait la ruine à la transgression: c'est sur ce joueur-là que l'écrivain aujourd'hui doit prendre exemple, en se montrant d'autant plus exigeant envers soi que le monde l'est moins envers les autres. Opposer à l'ignominie régnante (tout

(en sachant que c'est risible) toujours plus de fermeté et de force dans sa recherche de la justesse. C'est-à-dire, en particulier, et je me rapproche de notre conversation, ne laisser passer que le meilleur de soi, en effaçant tout le reste. Est-ce que les idées de Mozart nous importent? Son chant nous suffit.

— Nouveau coup d'aile, nouvelle dérobade.

— Comprenez que j'ai, souvent, la nausée de l'écrit. Tous ces gens qui parlent avant d'être, sans avoir jamais été! Bavardage de spectres, pas même, de poupées; pas même: bavardage d'hommes du XX^e siècle, pressés, terrorisés, pleins d'impudeur et de sottise, d'assurance et de confusion, condamnés au chaos, mais ce n'est pas le chaos profond, le désordre originel, c'est l'informe d'une surface toujours plus étendue et toujours moins contrôlée! Il m'arrive d'imaginer un monde d'où seraient abolis soudain radio, télévision, journaux, revues, livres: concevez-vous ce calme, et quelle force reprendraient, dans ce silence, non seulement les visages, les gestes, le monde, mais la moindre chanson où ce monde se retrouverait changé? Or, je crois tout de même que certains poèmes aujourd'hui, très peu, certains fragments de poèmes, maintiennent dans un univers où l'indistinction va croissant cette fraîcheur acide du particulier qui est presque, pour nous, une résurrection; au moins, une façon de respirer. C'est sans doute pourquoi ces textes de recherche me laissent sur ma faim...

— Si vous précisiez un peu une pensée qui ne me semble guère moins informelle que celle que vous condamnez?

— Merci. Vos attaques m'aident plus qu'elles ne m'arrêtent, ou plutôt m'aident en arrêtant, précisément, ce mouvement trop prompt et trop étale auquel je suis toujours tenté de me laisser aller.

Je crois ceci; qu'en fin de compte, la meilleure réponse qui ait été donnée à toutes les espèces de questions que nous ne cessons de nous poser est l'absence de réponse du poème. À mon inquiétude, à mes doutes, à mon ignorance, même à mon dégoût de certains jours, ce qui s'oppose le mieux, ce n'est pas un traité de la Sagesse, un sermon sur Dieu; ce n'est pas non plus une formule savante, un axiome autoritaire; mais bien, quoi que j'en aie, et encore que j'aie souhaité aller au-delà, quelque poème, long ou bref, ce poème ne serait-il

à son tour qu'une question, la question même, peut-être, que je me posais. Pourquoi? Parce que dans le poème la question est devenue chant et s'est enveloppée dans un ordre sans cesser d'être posée. Je dois bien constater qu'il n'est pas de réponse qui puisse abolir la question; sinon, il y a longtemps qu'elle aurait été donnée, et que la vie sur cette terre aurait cessé pour faire place à je ne sais quoi d'impensable; mais je dois admettre du même coup qu'une question perpétuelle, demeurant absolument sans espoir de réponse, est également impensable. Que reste-t-il? Sinon cette façon de poser la question qui s'appelle la poésie et qui est vraisemblablement la possibilité de tirer des limites un chant, de prendre en quelque sorte appui sur l'abîme pour se maintenir au-dessus, sinon le franchir; une manière de parler du monde qui n'explique pas le monde, car ce serait le figer et l'anéantir, mais qui le montre tout nourri de son refus de répondre, vivant parce qu'impénétrable, merveilleux parce que terrible... Je vais essayer de m'exprimer encore autrement; d'énoncer quelque chose qui est une sorte de miracle (je vois que vous vous taisez, que jusque dans votre ironie vous commencez à me suivre, peut-être à me croire): c'est comme si l'homme, chaque fois qu'il touche le monde, ou autrui, dans sa réalité, c'est-à-dire, selon moi, avec sa part d'obscurité irréductible, avec son abîme, avec son refus de répondre à la question posée, avec ce qu'il a de définitivement insaisissable (quelle que soit l'évolution de la science, car ceci est d'un autre ordre), eh bien! c'est comme si l'homme, à ce moment-là, découvrirait que le monde, ou autrui, *chante* (ou prend forme, ou s'insère dans un ordre, ou se crée un ordre, peu importe). Le monde ne dit pas à celui qui le questionne ainsi, cherchant la clef de sa vie, la voie juste: voici la clef, voici la voie, et maintenant ne questionnez plus (cette clef pouvant être le système qu'on voudra, du naturisme au marxisme). Non, le monde seulement apparaît avec la beauté des choses du monde qui n'est pas une beauté sans tache, et sa réponse est ce chant où la question continue à être posée, mais où elle est comme portée par un souffle et allégée; sa réponse est seulement sa présence chantante, mesurée, et c'est elle que le poème traduit ou simplement répète; le poème en qui se retrouvent par un mouvement naturel mille rapports complexes (du son au sens, du

concret à l'abstrait, du rêve au souvenir, du proche au lointain) que nous serions bien incapables de saisir par l'analyse.

— Je vous vois venir: deux phrases encore, et vous affirmerez triomphalement que le poète est le seul à savoir vivre, parce qu'une sensibilité particulière le maintient continuellement en contact avec la réalité du monde, qu'il lui suffit de se laisser guider par ce chant... que désormais tout est facile...

— C'est vous, maintenant, qui courez trop vite. Car presque tout conjure aujourd'hui contre ce chant, pour nous dérober la possibilité de le saisir; on le dirait toujours plus faible, plus incertain, plus éloigné. Du fait même qu'il enveloppe la question sans l'abolir, il demeure lui-même, toujours, en quelque temps que ce soit, ouvert au doute, exposé à l'altération (à la différence du dogme qui, étant mort, est inaltérable et solide). Parlerions-nous ici, autrement? Et pas seulement ici en ce moment, mais parlerions-nous jamais? Nous serions plus muets et plus solides que les pierres.

Écoutez encore ceci: pourquoi ai-je écrit ces textes qui ne me satisfont qu'à moitié et qui, au lieu de chanter, cherchent la possibilité du chant? Parce que je suis privé du chant, exilé du chant, c'est-à-dire tristement, terriblement éloigné de la réalité du monde. Chaque jour notre temps déverse entre elle et moi une masse d'abstractions et une masse d'immondices à travers lesquelles je n'avance plus qu'à grand-peine, comme quelqu'un qui serait enseveli sous des décombres (décombres de savoir et pourriture sous ces décombres) et qui, s'il veut respirer, doit d'abord les soulever, essayer de les soulever. Ceci n'est qu'à peine une image, vous le savez, puisque des décombres réels, il y en a aussi plus qu'on n'en voudrait. Est-ce moi qui suis trop faible, est-ce la catastrophe qui est trop considérable? L'un et l'autre sans doute, jusqu'à ce que nous ayons tout à fait cessé de respirer et que nous soyons anéantis par ce double mouvement en apparence contradictoire et en réalité convergent: la prolifération des ordres abstraits et celle du chaos, l'alliance horrible, au-dessus de nos têtes, de la rigueur scientifique et de la bestialité, dont nous savons à quelles explosions elle aboutit... Vous vous arrêtez? Vous reconnaissez maintenant quelque chose de notre monde dans ces propos qui vous paraissaient si éloignés du

quotidien? Vous commencez peut-être également à comprendre que la poésie, aujourd'hui, est d'autant moins mensongère qu'on y sent mieux cette précarité presque risible du chant, l'incertitude, l'effroi, le dénuement de celui qui s'est obstiné à le poursuivre? Il me semble que je ne suis plus tellement dans les grands mots maintenant, ou du moins qu'ils ont pris leur pesant d'ombre, de malheur... Quoi? Que dites-vous?

— Admettant provisoirement la possibilité de vous croire, de voir dans vos remarques la traduction partielle et particulière d'un certain nombre de faits réels, je dois vous poser une question: si le chant, qui semble pour vous inséparable de la réalité profonde du monde, si ce rythme qu'aucune mesure abstraite ne peut saisir, deviennent de moins en moins perceptibles, qu'advient-il?

— Regardez autour de vous: si vous voyez des spectres, des monstres, non pas ceux des mythes, mais des hommes devenus pareils à des spectres et à des monstres, et il me semble que vous devez en voir, que nos rues en sont pleines; si vous voyez d'une part des machines et de l'autre des mannequins (et cela aussi est visible un peu partout), vous aurez vu ce qu'il adviendra quand aura disparu complètement cette mesure cachée. Aujourd'hui, ces spectres ne sont pas perdus définitivement encore; ils sont malheureux, ils se saoulent, ils se suicident; mais s'ils en arrivent à perdre même le malheur... je ne sais si cela est possible, mais ce serait certainement la fin. N'essayez donc pas de me faire abdiquer. Corrigez mes élans, je le veux bien. Mais vous êtes sans pouvoir même sur le plus faible écho du chant qu'il m'arrive encore d'appréhender.

— J'entends bien. Pour vous la poésie est le salut, la « gardienne de l'Être », un résidu peut-être misérable mais demeuré pur de la religion, la vraie philosophie, que sais-je encore? Il me semble que je connais ces formules éclatantes et, si l'on y songe, étonnamment prétentieuses. Moi qui ne voyais dans la poésie qu'un jeu, merveilleux quelquefois, mais si frêle, si frivole...

— Tâchons d'être plus précis encore. Je n'aime pas plus que vous ces formules, et tout ce que l'on peut avancer contre elles, j'y ai songé aussi. En fin de compte, peut-être la définition la moins fausse de la poésie serait-elle celle qui embras-

serait ces contraires, qui l'envisagerait à la fois comme un jeu insignifiant et comme un témoignage du secret, une façon légère qu'aurait le secret de nous parvenir, comme si sa suprême ruse était de porter ce costume de folie, ou ces voiles... Il n'est pas facile d'interpréter sans emphase et sans imprécision une expérience qui se dérobe.

MONOLOGUE

« Le douteur s'est éloigné comme si je l'avais convaincu; mais un ennemi plus dangereux a pris sa place, une inquiétude plus sourde et qui s'exprime moins clairement. Qu'est-ce qui me prive du chant (et c'est comme si j'allais perdre la seule vraie vie)? D'où me vient de plus en plus souvent cette confusion dans l'esprit, pareille à une molle paralysie, à un engourdissement par le brouillard qui me ferait craindre de devenir brouillard à mon tour? Un fantôme qui ne cesserait de revenir aux lieux où jadis il respira...

« N'est-ce pas à mesure que je prends plus de place, et une forme plus définie, dans le monde qu'on dit réel, le monde où l'on a un nom et des biens? Je perds la liberté insouciant du secret, je dois répondre aux exigences imposées par cette forme que j'ai épousée ou qu'on m'a prêtée. Qui me gardera de cette mort avant la mort? Contrairement à ce qu'ont pensé ceux qui furent nos maîtres et même nos dieux, les grandes et admirables figures de la fin du siècle passé, ce ne sera pas la solitude, le défi, le refus. Je crois plutôt, aujourd'hui, que dans la solitude, ce qui vient la nourrir, ce n'est pas le monde, ce n'est pas la mesure, mais le moi avec ses combats et ses soucis, de sorte qu'on finit par ne plus voir et entendre que lui, et non le monde. Mais aujourd'hui, dans ce sombre temps et sous toutes ces menaces, ce qui nous aidera, ce n'est pas l'expansion démesurée de la personne, mais son effacement, donc tout ce qui la limite et la combat. L'enfant qui exige, qui sourit, qui renâcle, l'amie qui, par tendresse ou par impatience, recommence chaque jour à nous tirer des filets du souci personnel, qui rompt notre acharnement, qui délite nos murailles, si je vis encore comme il faut vivre, c'est à eux que je le devrai. Belle ennemie, vrai ange gardien, pour-

suis ta guerre contre ce qu'il y a en moi de pire, la lourdeur, le sérieux, le froid; à nous deux, grâce à notre épineuse alliance, nous réussirons à ne pas sombrer. Le chant est en effet comme ces plantes qui se rétractent lorsqu'on y touche. Quand j'aurai appris à m'en détourner, peut-être s'ouvrira-t-il de nouveau, et je respirerai son parfum confondu au tien ».

ROBERT BESSON

MUSICIENNES A GOURNAH

*Au terme d'inutiles journées
le masque ou l'insecte s'éclaire
sur la plage vidée d'amour
dans la coquille de ses mains.
Le sable reste sa préférence
la profondeur d'un fruit vif.*

*Au terme de la route mêlée
à la route qu'une poussière porte
à n'être qu'estrade au soleil.
A toi, pavot de ce sommeil
qui s'écrase pour des colonnes
au décor tendu qu'elles fascinent.*

*Qui dit le parfum grêle, s'irise,
d'un son qui gouverne la mer
voix fraîches des menthes vertes
sur des collines dépouillées, lumière
qui lavez ce présage et ce feu
à son pareil, un fil dans leur éternité.*

*Qui dit pleureuses des cyprés,
l'épine qui fore votre sein,
qui dit l'oiseau que vous tenez
dans la masse de vos torpeurs*

*qui dit la voile soulevée
cette litière aux rares pierres
où votre marche tourne, espère,
deux visages se répondant.*

*Devant un vitrail de cris,
le vide affleure ma main.
Rien ne vient. La route passe
et vous passez et vous tenez
les palmes de l'indécision.*

*Votre main vient de s'ouvrir,
l'instrument qui la comblait
fuit dans la terre retournée,
l'amphore épuise la pluie,
le mal est un nouvel aimé,
toute patience l'indiffère.*

*Joueuses du jour achevé
étrangères qui me nommez
dans le défilé des lumières,
étrangères frappées sur l'ombre
pour une maigre destinée
votre voyage suit votre faim.*

*Devant un vitrail criblé
de la moindre idée des choses
la sécheresse allonge et trace
une campagne où vous tenez
l'aigre vent dans un puits d'air
la déchirure d'un été.*

ROGER LAPORTE

UNE MIGRATION

A Maurice Blanchot

Mourir, c'est devenir, mais
nulle part, vivant?

RENÉ CHAR

Dès que je fus rentré chez moi, je commençai aussitôt à préparer un nouveau voyage. Après un an, je n'étais toujours pas prêt et j'avais pris l'habitude de me tenir sur un divan bas où je songeais aux moyens de ne plus jamais voyager. Je tombai malade et, le visage tourné vers le mur, je restais allongé dans la pénombre de ma somnolence moite. Par précaution, même de jour, je fis tenir clos les volets pleins.

A peine venais-je de prendre cette mesure que j'entendis s'éveiller le premier souffle du vent. Sans qu'il augmentât, les volets se mirent à battre. Je résistai. Quelques jours après, j'entendis le va-et-vient murmurant d'une brise cette fois intime. Les volets se mirent encore à battre, je dus me lever et, dans la honte, les retenir à moi de toutes mes forces. La lutte me dura qu'un instant, mais les volets avaient été lésardés, et seules les larmes m'avaient empêché de voir. J'avais néanmoins un tel regret de n'avoir pas répondu que j'eus envie de jeter un coup d'oeil par la lézarde d'un volet. Il était trop tard: je n'aurais vu qu'un jour déjà flétri. Il ne me restait plus qu'à me recoucher. Cette brève épreuve avait épuisé mes dernières forces. Je savais qu'à résister encore une fois je deviendrais fou ou même je mourrais. Aussi je me décidai à répondre au premier appel.

Une fois l'Avent proclamé, les heures s'écoulèrent dans un tel calme que je me demandais si le temps favorable n'était point passé. A un moment où je regardais distraitemment du côté de la fenêtre, je m'aperçus que volets et fenêtre s'étaient ouverts sans aucun bruit. Déjà j'étais debout et je me penchais dehors. Il était très tôt le matin, et du regard j'eus vite remonté l'espace triste de la gelée blanche. N'était-ce que cela? Plus loin je ne distinguais rien, ni jour ni même nuit, mais qu'y avait-il donc? Je ne voyais rien et pourtant je ne pouvais détourner mon regard de ce lieu où la rosée blanche n'était même pas encore formée. J'ai dû faire le guet. Déjà j'étais débusqué et c'est alors que...

OUI. J'ai dit Oui. J'ai décidé de faire ce grand voyage et soudain, ô bonheur! j'ai habité la lumière irradiante qui allait...

Dans mon coeur s'est effilochée sa clarté, sillage, fumée de Venise.

J'avais vu passer une comète.

Las! Je n'avais pas eu le temps de faire un vœu.

J'allais me mettre en route, lorsque j'ai entendu la voix d'une enfant. Elle disait: « Quel est ton nom? » Le respect de cette voix douce et vierge m'a fait tressaillir. Après quelques instants, j'ai ri. Ainsi ai-je remercié l'enfant.

Le nom du Pays, quel était-il donc? Son lieu? Et par où me fallait-il passer? Et où étais-je? Quoique la nuit ne fût point noire, je ne voyais rien. Pourtant d'où venait mon malaise? J'ai eu le mal de mer. Étais-je en train de m'embarquer? Je tanguais: déjà je n'étais plus à quai! Le navire s'est mis à rouler. La barre était-elle devenue ivre? Le navire chassait sur son ancre floue mais tenace. Sous mes pas tout se dérobait: j'avais dû prendre pied sur un vieux bateau tout pourri d'humidité et déjà englouti jusqu'au pont. Je n'ai pas fait naufrage, mais où donc avais-je été repoussé? J'ai senti une odeur de mer. J'étais dans un port. J'allais m'embarquer! Avais-je pris un mauvais départ, un faux-pas m'avait-il fourvoyé dans un marécage? Le port s'est enlisé. J'avais perdu pied, mais mon seul désir: m'en aller au plus tôt de ce lieu peu sûr où je ne trouvais point mon assise, n'allait-il pas se

réaliser: tout entier je me sentais en partance! Étais-je dans un port? Sur un bateau? Tout s'est effondré, mais j'ai vu une noirceur marine constellée de feux-follets. Je me suis élancé des cent-mille ports — ah! que je bondisse vers la barque unique en pleine mer verte —, j'ai follement gambadé sur mes échasses de sept lieues et je me suis affalé loin d'Aigues-Mortes la Veuve.

Je me suis relevé et j'ai regardé tout autour de moi. J'étais dans une lande. Mes pieds ne reposaient pas à plat, à même la terre franche, mais sur la longue cime basse d'une forêt de saules nains, flore élémentaire, la seule de ce marécage presque asséché. Aucune ruine, aucune trace ne laissaient penser qu'un homme eût jamais vécu sur cette terre écartée. Jamais aucune poule d'eau ne viendrait me rudoyer de son aile salubre, car aucun animal, pas même le moindre rongeur ne vivait dans ces lieux déshérités. Dans cette terre inculte et vierge, il était donc inutile de chercher un chemin. Pourtant ne me fallait-il pas aller au Pays! Son lieu, quel était-il donc? Par où me fallait-il passer? Et quel était son nom? Aucune indication, pas le moindre renseignement ne m'avaient été donnés: comment pouvais-je aller au Pays?

Je me suis allongé et j'ai mis l'oreille à même le sol. Rien n'a murmuré. Je n'ai point entendu le pas de l'enfant. Pourtant, si je repérais sa place, ne trouverais-je pas la direction du Pays? A la terre j'ai confié mon message: « Quel est mon nom? » Je n'ai même pas entendu l'écho de ma propre voix. Alors, debout, j'ai hurlé: « Quel est ton nom? Quel est ton nom? » Pas même un rire ne m'a répondu.

Je n'avais rien entendu, je ne voyais toujours rien, mais comme mes mains auraient voulu étreindre! Posément il me fallait d'abord palper chaque place de l'espace, je trouverais la flèche de son pouls et alors en plein coeur du Pays j'aurai bondi. J'ai fermé les yeux et, les bras en croix, j'ai très lentement pivoté sur moi-même. Je jouais à colin-maillard: j'ai brassé toutes les pistes, mais tout adversaire toujours se dérobait. Ah! que je sois attaqué par une horde de chevaux-sauvages et que la glace de mon poing s'abatte. J'ai voulu m'élancer à tous les horizons, sur mon visage j'ai cru sentir ruis-

seler une pluie de sang noir, girouette flexible et décentrée j'ai encore virevolté par saccades et dansé un ballet sans grâce, puis, Don Quichotte, je me suis affalé parmi mes mains meurtries de neige molle.

Je me suis relevé. Comme j'avais souffert! N'avais-je pas voulu m'élancer trop tôt? Ne devais-je pas d'abord explorer cette contrée? Je me suis mis en route. La marche était désagréable et lente, car le sol était visqueux et presque mouvant. Étais-je aussi loin du marécage que je l'avais cru? J'ai aperçu une rangée de jones menus. Je l'ai suivie et j'ai marché d'un pas meilleur, car elle longeait une rigole qui partait au loin. Pour me souhaiter bonne chance, j'ai tressé une croix de saule et sur l'eau je l'ai posée. J'ai suivi la rigole et j'ai marché avec une telle facilité qu'aussitôt j'ai perdu de vue la croix de saule. La rigole est devenue rivière et elle s'est encore élargie: allait-elle vers la mer! Trouverais-je un port! Longtemps j'ai continué d'avancer. Ma marche s'est infléchie vers la gauche, le fleuve est devenu si large que l'autre rive a disparu. Était-ce déjà la mer? J'ai revu l'autre rive et d'une seule enjambée j'ai franchi la rigole. J'avais fait le tour d'un lac!

J'ai longtemps attendu. La croix de saule ne m'a pas rejoint. Les eaux dormaient. Le souffle d'un vent imperceptible m'avait-il induit en erreur? Ne dit-on pas que les fleuves naissent parfois de grands lacs, et naguère n'avais-je pas trouvé la rivière à la pointe alors extrême de sa marche? Pendant mon absence, elle se serait frayée un chemin et elle aurait couru jusqu'à la mer! J'ai suivi la rigole. La terre malléable portait encore l'empreinte de mes pas. Par jeu, j'ai avancé en posant régulièrement mes pas dans mes anciens pas. Ce jeu est devenu impossible: pendant mon absence, l'écart entre mes pas s'était agrandi. J'étais déjà passé par là, mais je foulais une terre vierge. Mes traces ont disparu. J'ai longtemps suivi la rivière. Le paysage était si monotone que je n'étais point sûr de l'avoir déjà vu et peut-être avais-je dépassé mon point de départ. J'ai aperçu la croix de saule. Je me suis arrêté. Peu à peu elle m'a distancé: je descendais bien le cours de la rivière! Je me suis avancé jusqu'à la hauteur de ma compagne de voyage dont je ne voulais plus me séparer. Ce jeu. Il y a combien d'années? Si l'on m'avait dit qu'un

jour me servirait d'avoir si bien su tresser des petits paniers! Je me suis donc construit une nacelle de jonc. Avec un balsa ne traverse-t-on point même l'Océan! De la rivière, j'avais retiré la croix de saule et sur mon esquif je l'ai placée en figure de proue. J'ai payagé avec les mains. Longtemps. L'eau blanche n'était point froide. Soudain j'ai manqué de glisser à la rivière. J'ai cru avoir heurté la rive et m'être embourbé. J'ai dû me rendre à l'évidence: la rivière n'allait pas plus loin. Je ne l'avais point charmée. Simplement, perdu dans un endroit de la lande où je n'étais jamais passé, j'étais assis dans une nacelle à peine moins longue que ce marigot d'une boue bleutée où je m'étais échoué. Nul chemin ne menait hors de cette contrée: cette fausse rivière, simple canal, allait seulement d'une mer fermée à une autre mer morte. Je me suis retourné. La saillie infime d'une saulée témoignait seule de ma rivière disparue.

Lorsque je m'étais trouvé dans le marécage, j'avais cru à l'incident bientôt oublié d'un faux départ, mais je n'étais toujours pas au Pays, même pas au bord de la mer, seulement dans un arrière-marécage dont je n'avais réussi à sortir ni en me donnant la main, ni en suivant la rivière, car elle m'avait entraîné encore davantage vers l'intérieur. M'étais-je même éloigné? Où étais-je donc? Loin? Près? A la circonférence? Au centre de cette contrée? Et où était le Pays? Comment le savoir! Moi, ce fameux voyageur, je m'étais complètement égaré. Il ne me restait plus qu'une seule ressource: marcher droit devant moi. Je sortirais de cette lande, et alors mon véritable voyage pourrait enfin commencer.

Au hasard j'ai pris une direction, mais j'ai décidé, même si je devais marcher pendant plus d'un jour, de ne prendre de repos qu'une fois sorti de cette lande. J'ai marché pendant plusieurs jours, mais, à ma surprise, je marchais toujours dans la plaine des saules. La persévérance: voilà mon salut! J'ai donc continué de marcher. Toujours dans la même direction. J'ai marché. J'ai marché, j'ai marché, j'ai marché, j'ai marché et je marchais toujours dans la plaine des saules. Bonne est la persévérance, mais l'entêtement? Nouvelle malchance, n'avais-je pas pris la plus mauvaise direction: celle qui entraînait sans fin vers l'intérieur de cette lande à chaque pas plus sèche? Pourtant il me suffisait peut-être de faire

bien peu de pas, et quelque imperceptible changement m'avertirait de l'orée d'un chemin. J'ai marché et j'ai continué de marcher sur une terre stérile. Je me suis arrêté, j'ai encore marché. Et me suis arrêté. J'ai rebroussé chemin. Je n'ai point jeté un seul coup d'oeil en arrière.

J'ai marché. J'ai beaucoup marché. J'ai encore marché. J'ai eu marché pendant beaucoup plus longtemps que pendant l'aller, mais la terre était toujours aussi sèche. J'ai continué de transhumer dans l'ennui de cette lande aigre : jamais je ne consentirais à devenir un pèlerin insolvable ! Mes jambes marchaient, mes jambes marchaient, mais j'étais toujours aussi loin même de l'arrière-marécage. J'ai changé de direction et j'ai encore changé de direction, mais toujours je pérégrinais dans la lande, et peut-être ne parcourais-je qu'un espace ridiculement petit. J'ai battu la campagne. Ambulabat in horto... ambulabat in horto. A l'ablatif, parce qu'il n'y a pas de changement de lieu. Parce qu'il n'y a pas de changement de lieu. Hallucination due à la fatigue ? J'ai eu l'impression d'avoir toujours vécu, toujours marché dans cette zone morte. Qu'est-ce que je faisais ici ? Qu'est-ce que je cherchais ? Qu'est-ce que je cherchais donc ? Et qu'avait voulu dire l'enfant lorsqu'elle m'avait demandé : « Quel est ton nom ? » Je n'en savais plus rien ! Étais-je venu ici pour être affublé d'un quelibet : le Fou ? Comme un enfant, je me suis mis à pleurer. Chose-en-souffrance, personne ne viendrait donc me réclamer ? Ah ! si seulement survenait un passeur qui me prenne et m'emporte dans ses bras généreux et tout-puissants et en un clin d'oeil me dépose bien loin d'ici. Ici, il n'y avait personne. Personne n'avait dû passer ni ne passerait jamais par cette contrée inhospitalière où je ne voulais pas vivre plus longtemps. Je ne voulais même pas m'y asseoir, ne serait-ce qu'un seul instant, et pourtant je ne pouvais en sortir !

J'étais parti pour aller au Pays, mais je ne pouvais m'éloigner de cette lande, comment en étais-je arrivé là ? Était-ce un châtiment parce que jadis, avant de me décider à entreprendre ce grand voyage, si souvent j'avais dit Non ? Avais-je été chassé du Pays, et le faux pas initial m'avait-il rendu si amnésique que j'étais incapable de reconnaître le chemin ? Avais-je été condamné à la relégation ? — Je n'avais même pas eu à me mettre en route, seulement à dire Oui, et même,

un instant, j'avais été emporté par la comète: je n'avais donc pas été déporté et pourtant, sans avoir été chassé du Pays, je vivais en déportation. Jamais je n'avais vécu au Pays, je ne connaissais que l'exil et c'est pourquoi j'ai envié le sort du banni, car du moins il peut se souvenir de sa patrie. Je ne savais rien du Pays, je ne savais même pas comment le chercher, mais j'avais dit Oui: je ne pouvais donc consentir ni à m'attarder ni surtout à me perdre en route. J'avais reçu l'invitation et elle n'avait pas été décommandée, je ne pouvais donc croire que je connaîtrais seulement l'exil, mais, puisqu'il fallait aller au Pays, à coup sûr il y avait une issue. Pourquoi donc ne pouvais-je sortir de cette lande?

Elle était sans chemin, elle ne m'avait point reconduit jusqu'au port, mais elle ne me retenait pas: jamais je ne m'étais heurté à des remparts infranchissables et toujours j'avais marché librement sans rencontrer le moindre obstacle. Cette lande je ne pouvais même pas l'accuser! Elle n'avait jamais rien fait ni pour moi ni contre moi: elle était neutre. Était-ce bien une chance? Longtemps j'avais cru que je transitais entre les remparts d'Aigues-Mortes et la mer, mais je ne l'avais point regagnée, et sans doute devais-je seulement pérégriner entre la Tour de Constance et les remparts. Je transitais dans leur entre-deux, mais si, perdu dans l'épaisseur de la circonférence, je ne devais jamais rencontrer ni remparts ni prison, si je devais seulement errer parmi les ruines du bantier à venir d'Aigues-Mortes la Veuve-Blanche, j'étais encore et toujours dans l'espace de la prison, no man's land où je pouvais aller où bon me semblait, mais que m'importait: c'était au Pays que je voulais aller, et ainsi je n'étais point libre. Jamais je n'avais été prisonnier, j'avais toujours été dehors, ce no man's land était neutre, mais il l'était toujours: il s'étendait indéfiniment devant ma marche, je serais toujours dehors et ainsi jamais je n'avais pu ni ne pourrais l'attaquer: il était impossible d'en sortir par effraction. Cette neutralité était ma perte, car, sans avoir à se battre, elle triomphait de moi.

Depuis que j'étais entré dans ce terrain vague, jamais, je n'avais pu me battre! Si je l'avais pu, ne serait-ce qu'une seule fois, j'aurais pu mettre à profit tous mes préparatifs de voyage et depuis longtemps je serais au Pays. Puisque la neu-

tralité même de ce no man's land m'était ennemie, il fallait donc d'abord que je me batte et c'est pourquoi je me construiraï une formidable Ville-Forte. J'y travailleraï pendant des siècles, avec des milliers d'esclaves je charrieraï de gigantesques blocs de granit et je m'élèveraï une forteresse inexpugnable sans porte ni fenêtre. Lorsqu'elle serait si grande qu'elle s'étendrait plus largement que l'horizon, je me glisseraï à reculons par l'étroite fente que je me serais ménagée et, au fur et à mesure que je gagneraï le centre de la citadelle, je fermeraï derrière moi toute issue: de la Tour de Constance, il serait impossible de s'évader! Lorsque la cellule royale serait elle-même toute close, je serais si encastré dans cette demi-sphère d'une seule coulée que mes jambes seraient tout à fait immobiles, et lorsque ma poitrine nue rencontrerait le métal noir, alors, alors enfin je serai prisonnier, je pourrai me battre et, d'un seul coup d'épaule, Lazare, j'aurai triomphé du tombeau! — Et j'ai continué de marcher dans la lande, pétrissant encore au creux de ma main cette boule molle de glaise et de saule flexible que j'avais tout à l'heure ramassée. Ah! si seulement la lande avait été glacée par la sécheresse conquérante d'un vent dur.

J'ai continué de marcher, mais, pour la première fois depuis mon départ, avec une extrême lenteur, car j'avais été mis à mal. Aucune bataille n'avait jamais eu lieu et pourtant je venais d'être définitivement brisé dans mon vif. Jadis la conquête des plus hautes cimes avait été mon orgueil, maintenant je n'avais plus goût à la violence, elle me faisait horreur, et jamais plus je ne m'y abandonnerais. Les yeux ouverts, j'avais seulement rêvé de la Tour de Constance et pourtant n'avais-je pas commis un acte répréhensible? Envers qui donc étais-je coupable?

J'ai marché avec crainte, tête basse et attentif à mes pas. Qu'était-ce donc que je voyais? Je me suis penché: la lande était duvetée de fleurs. Venaient-elles d'éclore? Fixant toujours mon regard sur l'horizon, avais-je négligé de les voir? Elles étaient toutes d'une même espèce que je ne connaissais pas, voisine peut-être des sauges. Comme elles étaient singulières! Épanouies sans doute, mais en rudes bourgeons. Pourtant

j'aurais aimé à rencontrer l'enfant pour lui en offrir un bouquet. J'ai retenu ma main maladroite, car ces fleurs comment fallait-il les cueillir? Si je trouvais le seul geste convenable, n'arriverais-je pas aussitôt au Pays? Une seconde fois, j'ai retenu ma main déjà moins vive. Si je cueillais ces fleurs, leur beauté ne se fanerait-elle pas sous ma main stérile et, en un instant, ne tuerais-je pas tout l'enchantement de cette plaine de fleurs violettes! Je me suis relevé et, retenant mon souffle, je ne me suis point senti ridicule de m'éloigner sur la pointe des pieds. Je n'avais point cueilli une seule de ces fleurs.

Pourquoi cette pudeur? Quelle appréhension m'avait retenu? Si j'avais cueilli une seule fleur, cette impatience, j'aurais eu le sentiment de commettre un attentat: j'aurais été coupable, car sur cette terre la violence était interdite. Jamais on ne pouvait l'exercer. Elle n'avait point cours pour aller au Pays. On ne pouvait s'en emparer d'assaut. Je m'étais cru tout à fait perdu, égaré dans un voyage supplémentaire, mais j'en avais à présent la certitude: depuis le début j'avais commencé mon vrai voyage et même j'avais avancé, car cette découverte: la violence sans pouvoir, jamais je n'aurais pu la faire en dehors de cette contrée. Sans chemins, elle était le Chemin. J'avais joué à qui perd gagne!

Comme j'étais impie de m'être livré à la violence! Pourtant je n'avais pas été châtié, je n'avais pas été écrasé ni même effleuré de la moindre blessure et, si j'avais été meurtri jusqu'à épuiser toute violence, par un maître j'avais été lentement éduqué. Même si je l'avais pu, je n'aurais pas voulu retourner chez moi, car, depuis que je vivais dans ces lieux réputés malsains, j'avais acquis une santé nouvelle: j'avais maigri, je me sentais beaucoup plus jeune, et je n'avais nulle envie de revenir sous un climat plus doux pour prendre n'importe quels femme et enfants. Comme jadis était loin! Depuis combien de temps avais-je commencé mon voyage? Je ne pouvais le savoir: la lumière était si paisible que même à l'horizon elle ne se givrait d'aucun souffle, si égale que nulle part mon corps ne la courbait et ne lui avait retranché l'ombre stricte de son marbre. Emigrant au Pays, mais vivant dans un lieu où le soleil ne s'était encore jamais levé, comment aurais-je pu m'orienter! Le jour était sans heure: nulle direction n'indiquait le Pays. Depuis que j'étais entré dans cette

contrée, qu'avais-je donc peu à peu appris? Quelle découverte, cette fois capitale, étais-je enfin sur le point de faire? Il y avait bien le Pays, mais il était impossible de trouver sa direction parce qu'absurde de la chercher. Le Pays n'était pas ce que j'avais toujours cru, mais que l'on ne m'avait point dit: la Ville.

Le Pays n'était pas la Jérusalem du repos éternel, et c'est pourquoi je n'avais pu le prendre d'assaut. Comment pouvais-je l'atteindre, et même que signifiait: aller au Pays? Dès maintenant devais-je me lancer dans de nouvelles entreprises? Faire ce seul projet, n'était-ce pas retomber dans la violence inutile et perverse? Comme on est long à changer! Patiemment le maître m'avait éduqué, mais je n'avais pas encore assez mûri, assez vécu en exil pour être capable d'aller au Pays. Ne devais-je pas faire confiance au Chemin: n'était-il pas mon maître et même mon ami. J'ai donc continué de flâner dans la plaine violette. Que pouvais-je faire d'autre! J'étais sans hâte. N'avais-je pas tout mon temps! N'étais-je pas en vacances! Il me fallait seulement prendre du repos et attendre. Aussi, avec respect, je me suis très lentement étendu parmi les fleurs. J'ai fermé les yeux et je me suis enfin détendu et abandonné à la souplesse odorante de la terre violette.

Quel extraordinaire voyage! Pourquoi donc maintenant étais-je si heureux? Si douce et si sûre, était-ce bien sur la terre que je reposais la tête? Etais-je donc...? Je n'ai pas ouvert les yeux. Etais-je toujours auprès de l'enfant? Où étais-je emporté? Soudain j'ai habité la lumière qui allait... Etais-je sur le point de survoler la plaine heureuse de l'enfant?...

Ah! que je continue ce voyage, que je voie son terme. Je m'étais relevé, pendant quelques pas j'avais couru, je me suis arrêté: seule une traînée blafarde marquait encore, au travers de mon cœur noir, le sillage de la comète que de nouveau j'avais connue l'espace d'un éclair. Pourquoi ne m'avait-elle pas emmené? Devrais-je donc rester tout seul! De nouveau je me suis promené dans la plaine des fleurs, mais qu'était-ce donc qui me gênait et qui m'avait toujours empêché d'esquisser de véritables gambades de joie? Qu'était-ce qui me manquait jusqu'à devenir une véritable oppression? La lande était au printemps, mais je n'entendais point

ses chants familiers. Pourquoi donc les oiseaux n'étaient-ils point arrivés? En l'absence et de l'enfant et des oiseaux, comment pourrais-je jamais être heureux! — Il me restait les fleurs. Amoureusement j'ai voulu encore les contempler. Pendant mon sommeil elles s'étaient tavelées de noir. J'ai voulu me précipiter, rejoindre la course du printemps, déboucher avec lui sur la plaine glorieuse des fleurs ouvertes. Voyais-je encore des fleurs? Au loin j'ai cru deviner l'écharpe gris-de-brume d'une soie impalpable parsemée de fleurs violettes et mouvantes. Tous les feux-follets ont disparu. J'avais eu tout le temps de faire un vœu et je m'étais tu.

Misère de moi! J'avais oublié de marcher et fait se faner les fleurs. Quelle paresse soudaine s'était emparée de moi? Je m'étais endormi dans cette terre d'exil! J'avais oublié le Pays et je m'étais moi-même tellement perdu de vue que je n'entendais que maintenant le rappel de la comète: voilà longtemps que j'aurais dû être arrivé au Pays. Comme j'étais en retard! Que m'était-il donc arrivé? Je m'étais laissé séduire par les fleurs trop belles de cette terre que j'avais crue mon amie, et tout à ma joie j'avais fini par croire que cette plaine des fleurs violettes était le Pays. Malheur à moi! Juste au moment où j'avais cru jouer à qui perd gagne, j'avais joué à qui gagne perd. Quelle cruauté!

J'ai regardé tout autour de moi. Personne ne pouvait se cacher dans cette contrée sans aucun accident de terrain, néanmoins je me suis senti mal à l'aise, j'ai frissonné et soudain, à voir cette terre ingrate, j'ai été si angoissé que je n'avais plus qu'un seul désir: celui de fuir au plus vite ce lieu ancien qui m'était tout d'un coup devenu moins familier qu'au premier jour à tel point que je ne le reconnaissais plus. J'ai encore scruté cette terre: elle n'était marquée d'aucun chemin, tout entière intègre, sans même une ligne d'horizon. Pourquoi donc, sans avoir été déplacé dans mon sommeil, sans avoir suivi la comète, étais-je soudain si dépaysé que j'avais le sentiment d'être déjà dans un temps ultérieur et de partir en voyage sur une terre nouvelle? La lande était maintenant sans aucune fleur et même rasée de toute plante, et j'ai encore frissonné. Que s'était-il donc passé? Prématurées, les fleurs

violettes venaient d'un faux printemps, simple redoux de Décembre, mais, après cet automne qui n'en avait pas fini de mourir, la lande avait été dépouillée de toute végétation par l'hiver qui était enfin arrivé.

Je ne voulais point demeurer plus longtemps dans cette terre désolée, mais, avant de marcher, ne me fallait-il pas trouver le moyen de gagner le Pays. Qu'avais-je donc appris? La violence était inutile, nulle direction n'indiquait le Pays, car il n'était pas une Ville. Belles découvertes en vérité! Pour arriver effectivement au Pays, elles ne m'étaient d'aucun secours. Seule la déconvenue m'avait-elle fait encore une fois frissonner? J'ai fait quelques pas et j'ai dérapé: le sol n'était plus fangeux, mais par endroits luisait une lame de verglas. Comme j'ai regretté de n'avoir pu m'exposer aux premières rigueurs de l'hiver! Tranchant, il avait si vite régné qu'il ne m'avait point donné le temps de m'hiverner: j'étais contraint de sans cesse marcher, et mon cerveau engourdi n'était plus capable de réfléchir. Au lieu de mettre à profit la courte halte du printemps prématuré, j'avais traîné et tout de mon long j'avais froissé les fleurs! Par quel maléfice m'étais-je contenté de découvertes négatives? Je n'avais toujours pas trouvé le moyen d'aller au Pays, je ne savais même pas comment le chercher et pourtant j'avais une certitude: cette terre était inhabitable, je ne pouvais y demeurer plus longtemps, ni même m'y asseoir ne serait-ce qu'un seul instant. J'ai donc marché, mais je ne suis pas sorti de l'hiver. Le froid qui me dénudait a encore augmenté. J'ai marché, mais la brûlure de l'hiver est devenue si intense que mon souffle s'est mis à givrer. Je rêvais à la tiédeur embaumée des alizés violets lorsque mon visage s'est revêtu d'un masque de glace.

Je ne pouvais rester davantage sur cette terre de froid, mais je ne pouvais plus continuer de marcher et n'étais-je pas comme enclos par l'hiver! A tout prix il me fallait hiverner. Jadis ma violence m'avait protégé de ce lieu sans douceurs, mais il l'avait démantelée, j'étais à présent exposé à la certitude revêche de son froid, mais, dans cette plaine rase et découverte, il était impossible de se protéger. J'ai tenté de me faire un abri, mais mes ongles n'ont même pas égratigné le marbre de cette terre à jamais intacte. Ah! si seulement il avait neigé. J'ai alors décidé de dormir dans le gel:

je me roulerais en une boule compacte, ma chaleur veillerait sur mon sommeil, et ainsi je connaîtrais le temps de relâche de la mauvaise saison. La nuit était blanche, et je n'ai pu dormir. Comment le jour aurait-il pu se coucher, le soleil n'était toujours pas levé!

Naguère j'avais voulu sortir de cette contrée et je n'avais pas pu, maintenant où j'avais voulu hiverner, ce lieu sans pitié, son temps si mauvais, m'en avaient empêché. Si je ne pouvais m'en éloigner, que n'était-il du moins hospitalier! Pourquoi donc, si je ne pouvais m'en aller, me tenait-il toujours en éveil? A quoi bon sans cesse rouvrir ma plaie! Mes jambes marchaient, mes jambes marchaient, mais elles foulaient toujours l'espace de l'hiver qui à chaque pas m'infligeait une torture indicible. Cette terre je l'avais crue neutre, je l'avais même prise pour mon amie, lorsque je l'avais qualifiée d'ennemie je m'étais à peine approché de la vérité, maintenant j'avais découvert sa véritable identité: le Bourreau.

Tant ma souffrance était grande, n'étais-je pas tout près d'atteindre le pôle magnétique de l'hiver où je mourrais parmi ses flammes glacées? Épouvantail pour nul moineau, faux arbre noir tordu par le froid, mon coeur n'allait-il pas se fendre sous le gel? Toute ma chaleur est morte, mais je n'ai pas fait la moindre halte, car l'épée de glace, loin de me tuer, m'a piqué au vif et m'a forcé à courir sur les grands espaces nus de l'hiver. Étais-je bien juste? Ce lieu était-il vraiment mon bourreau? Il ne m'avait point tué, il ne m'avait point enchaîné, tout au contraire à chaque instant il me forçait à m'en aller et même ne faisait-il pas tout pour m'écarter du supplice de l'hiver. Encore une fois j'avais été injuste: seul ce lieu me faisait marcher. Il ne m'avait point trompé: il était le Chemin. Rude ami en vérité: inhospitalier, il me chassait dehors. Ne devais-je pas aller au Pays! Parce qu'inhospitalier, il était mon ami. Lorsque la résignation me gagnait et que j'étais tenté de m'établir loin du Pays, il me contraignait à continuer ma route à tel point que pas un instant je ne pouvais connaître le découragement, et même pouvait-il être meilleur ami: à chaque pas, ô privilège! il me donnait l'espoir.

Tout à l'heure ferais-je le premier pas? Voilà longtemps que j'étais parti en voyage, aussi je commençais d'être réservé

dans mes joies : toute trouvaille, heureuse pourtant, avait été aussi ma perte, je le savais. Quel malheur allait donc m'arriver ? Ce lieu n'était-il pas le chemin ? J'ai bondi et je suis retombé. J'ai été expulsé par la fulguration du froid et je suis encore retombé. Ne deviendrais-je jamais plus léger que l'air ? J'ai été désir d'oiseau et je suis encore une fois retombé ! L'hiver me chassait dehors, mais dehors c'était encore lui que je retrouvais. Lorsque j'en venais à douter, à croire qu'il se jouait de moi et voulait m'emprisonner, déjà il m'avait rejeté dehors. Ce cycle serait-il sans fin ! Inhospitalier, il me chassait dehors, pourquoi ne me chassait-il pas au-dehors ? Il me forçait à partir, mais quant à mon souci unique : sortir de cette terre, pourquoi restait-il neutre ? Pourquoi assistait-il impassible à la vaine tentative de celui qui, jamais prisonnier, ne parvenait pas à s'évader ? Il me donnait l'espoir, pourquoi ne me donnait-il que l'espoir ? Il ne voulait pas de moi, de tout cœur j'étais fidèle à son désir, pourquoi donc, s'il était mon ami, ne venait-il pas à mon secours ? Pourtant il s'offrait à moi dans toute la nudité impressionnante de son espace lisse. Que m'avait dissimulé sa végétation ? Que m'apprenait donc sa franchise ? Sa disgrâce. Il ne cachait ni n'offrait aucune ressource : ce lieu n'était que pauvreté. Comment aurait-il pu m'aider : à lui-même le Pays faisait défaut ! Il m'ouvrait le chemin et me donnait l'espoir, tout entier il n'était que chemin et espoir, à la faveur de sa pauvreté jamais plus je ne pourrais avoir d'autre souci que le Pays — comme ma vie était devenue simple ! — mais il ne pouvait me venir en aide, me faire accéder à l'espérance, car il était seulement le chemin et seulement l'espoir. Comme cette terre pauvre était douce et sauvage !

Mon voyage était nécessaire, mais je n'étais toujours pas sorti de cette terre inhumaine : je n'avais pas pu m'y adapter, bien loin de m'y sentir chez moi chaque jour elle m'était devenue plus étrangère jusqu'à se faire intolérable, personne ne pouvait y vivre et c'était un mystère d'avoir pu jusqu'à maintenant y survivre, mais ce sursis n'était-il pas sur le point de s'achever ? L'hiver ne voulait pas me tuer, mais sa rigueur ne pouvait décliner, aussi bientôt je ne pourrais plus porter mon surnom du temps d'exil, car, Migrateur-en-souffrance, incapable d'obéir à l'amicale mais impérieuse nécessité, n'étais-

je pas sur le point de mourir! Pourtant comment ne pas encore espérer de voir surgir juste à temps, ou même pour la joie de mon ultime regard, les migrateurs du premier printemps. J'ai scruté le ciel et n'ai vu que le vide glacé. Une dernière fois je me suis élancé à la rencontre des oiseaux, mais il a fait si froid que la lumière a gelé. Alors j'ai chanté. Comme ma voix était blanche! Mon coeur s'était étoilé.

Je ne suis pas arrivé au Pays, je ne suis plus retombé sur la terre de froid, où donc étais-je? Enfin j'avais été expulsé, mais où donc avais-je été conduit? Il n'y avait plus ni marécage, ni lande, ni terre violette, ni terre de froid, mais simplement une lumière sans ombre quoique toujours floue: un faux-jour.

Cette lumière brouillée était si papillotante qu'elle fatiguait les yeux, si pauvre qu'elle-même je ne la voyais qu'avec peine. Mes mains ont voulu jouer avec les pâles flocons de lumière. Elles ne l'ont même pas effleurée. Cette lumière neigeuse, dont je sentais la fraîcheur presque à fleur de peau, se tenait-elle hors de ma portée? Moi-même n'étais-je pas dans ce faux-jour? Je n'avais plus le sentiment d'habiter mon propre corps; lorsque la lumière avait été pulvérisée sous la hache du gel avais-je été séparé de moi-même? Simplement je ne sentais plus mes jambes parce que je ne reposais plus sur une terre ferme. J'avais perdu pied, j'étais tombé hors de la lande mais loin du Pays, je m'étais fourvoyé dans leur entre-deux, et, sans pesanteur, peut-être tombais-je à l'horizontale et allais-je, petit flocon de neige noire, le long de la brume claire et sans danger. Que n'étais-je encore le maître d'au moins une nacelle! Dans le brouillard, au lieu de naviguer à l'estime, je l'aurais précipitée sur le premier obstacle, j'aurais fait naufrage, j'aurais repris pied, et mon talon dur aurait fait sonner l'hiver de la terre de cristal. Il n'y avait plus l'hiver, et je voyais seulement le faible halo d'une lointaine clarté nocturne. Étais-je même en mouvement le long de ce brouillard de lumière qui ne tombait jamais? Il y avait du bougé, mais n'était-ce pas la lumière qui tremblait? Où étais-je donc? J'étais en deçà du Pays, mais je n'étais point sûr d'être du moins au-delà de la lande et peut-être avais-je été repoussé

dans une zone creuse, du côté de la terre des hommes que je n'avais même pas rejointe. Moi qui voyageais depuis si longtemps, maintenant ne me trouvais-je plus qu'en deçà de la lande et n'étais-je qu'une petite flaque noire de brume stagnante? Au-delà? En deçà? Comment le savoir! Et dans quelle sorte de lieu est-ce que je me trouvais? Je ne pouvais l'identifier: je ne me voyais plus moi-même, je ne savais plus du tout qui j'étais. J'ai songé avec nostalgie à l'époque où je me demandais seulement à quel endroit j'étais situé, maintenant j'ignorais même la nature du lieu où j'avais été rejeté. Jamais je n'avais su où était le Pays, j'avais toujours ignoré mon nom, mais du moins je mesurais mon malheur et je pouvais dire: je pérégrine dans une lande. Il me fallait perdre cette habitude, car de ces piètres assurances — une lande! un juif errant! —, j'étais maintenant dépossédé. Ce jour faux me flouait de toute certitude et me condamnait à un malheur sans nom.

Comment pouvais-je savoir où j'étais: je ne voyais qu'un demi-jour, et si faible qu'il ne parvenait point jusqu'à ce lieu, douve peut-être, où j'étais tombé à faux. Même si l'enfant venait à passer et me regardait face à face, elle ne pourrait pas me voir, ni même mon ombre, car j'avais dû être mis à l'écart, repoussé dans un lieu incommode à la fois de côté et en-dessous du jour, à moins que j'eusse été jeté de biais ou même la tête en bas dans une fosse peu profonde quoique sans fond, car je voyais seulement, et de manière oblique, le tain diaphane de l'envers du jour. Sans aucun doute j'étais sorti de cette terre où j'avais si longtemps vécu, mais, puisque je n'étais pas arrivé au Pays, je ne pouvais m'en réjouir, et même tout au contraire un malheur sans précédent m'était arrivé: j'avais perdu le Chemin, j'avais été éloigné des voies de migration, j'avais été condamné à l'exil du contre-jour.

J'avais toujours été exilé du Pays, mais maintenant j'avais été expulsé du Chemin, où du moins j'avais vécu, et ainsi je supportais un double exil. Éconduit avais-je été placé dans une enclave neutre? Délaisse par mon ami, abandonné dehors, avais-je reçu cependant, dérision du voyageur, le droit au repos dans un lieu sans lumière? Puisque le Chemin m'avait été interdit, avais-je été conduit, sinon dans une Ville-refuge, du moins dans un lieu de sûreté où j'avais trouvé ma part,

pauvre part d'où je ne pouvais voir que cette mauvaise lumière? Me serait-elle ôtée? Serais-je conduit dans un lieu encore plus en retrait, au point aveugle, où je serais cette fois tout à fait enfoui dans mon ombre? Je ne pouvais le craindre: cette lumière peu sûre entreluirait toujours, sinon, voyageur incapable d'aller au Pays, je ne subirais plus le châtiment de l'exil: la frustration du jour. Je ne pouvais l'espérer: même très à l'écart de la lumière je serai toujours transi par son grésil. J'avais été condamné à vivre à perpétuité en exil, mais, bien loin de goûter une vie calme, je serai toujours le misérable point noir d'une rétine à la paupière mouchetée d'éclairs blafards, car toujours ce sera Brumaire.

J'ai glissé du point noir, le jour s'est davantage anémié, j'ai encore été repoussé plus loin, j'ai dépassé le point aveugle et alors je n'ai vu que la buée claire de mon souffle. Dans l'exil du contre-jour une résidence ne m'avait point été assignée, mais au contraire son séjour, comme celui de l'hiver, n'avait été interdit. Renonçant à me torturer, m'avait-on cette fois conduit dans un lieu de repos? Aucune sentinelle ne m'avait défendu l'accès à un lieu si pauvre, même en lumière. Que personne ne pouvait y vivre, et que jamais on ne pourrait me conduire dans un lieu encore plus malsain, pourtant. En cet instant même, j'éprouvais une telle angoisse qu'à coup sûr j'empiétais sur une zone interdite. Ainsi je n'étais pas condamné à vivre, mais, je l'avais oublié, à ne plus vivre en exil. Je n'avais pas été chassé du Pays, avant ce voyage je n'avais commis aucune faute, mais en ce moment même je me livrais à l'infraction de vivre dans un exil pourtant interdit. Lorsque j'avais dit Oui, la promesse de mon être futur m'avait été donnée, mais j'avais été incapable de répondre à cette injonction, je m'étais contenté d'une existence illégitime parce que sans visage, je m'étais surtout rendu coupable de me chercher vainement moi-même dans un lieu où je ne pouvais me trouver et où pourtant j'avais cru recevoir du moins mon surnom: Fou. Je n'avais pas le droit de passer pour un sédentaire: j'étais coupable d'avoir oublié l'ordre que pourtant, même au commencement de mon voyage, j'étais en retard pour exé-

cuter: être au Pays. Par bonheur mon ami ne m'avait point congédié, il ne m'avait point relégué loin des voies de migration — comment le Chemin aurait-il pu s'écarter de lui-même! — mais il m'avait fait sortir de l'hiver, il m'avait exilé de l'exil, il m'expulsait de cette zone interdite, et ainsi le Chemin, mon ami, commençait à me laver de ma faute, car il m'engageait dans l'exode de l'innocence. Je n'étais pas d'ici, je ne pouvais y habiter, et c'est pourquoi au Pays, où jamais je ne vécus, je migrais pour recevoir la pureté de mon nom: celui de la Terre natale. Alors je retrouverai l'enfant et cette fois je la verrai, car je pourrai lui donner mon nom. Mes accordailles étaient célébrées, mon prénom m'était donné, car, privilège des privilèges, espoir de l'espoir, sur ce fond de Pays je lisais le négatif de ma présence future: le Fiancé.

Juste en arrière de moi ma fiancée devait m'accompagner dans mon exode, toutefois elle ne pouvait pas me voir mais seulement la brume mourante de mon fantôme, car je venais encore d'être chassé dehors. Elle était sur le point de me rejoindre, mais en ce nouveau lieu elle ne pourrait plus recueillir ma trace, mais seulement lire le vestige de mon passage: le coup de fouet qui m'avait chassé au-dehors. J'ai brûlé l'étape suivante d'un pas si léger que ma promesse y verrait seulement l'ombre creuse de ma ligne de fuite. Brusquement j'en ai été écarté, et l'enfant a dû perdre de vue ce dernier et si pauvre témoignage de ma présence. Puisque j'étais devenu tout à fait invisible, où donc étais-je? Jamais je n'avais été prisonnier, je n'étais plus à terre, ni sur le quai, ni à quai, où étais-je, où étais-je donc? J'étais de nouveau en partance, mais resterais-je au port pour être encore une fois reconduit dans l'arrière-port et même dans l'arrière-marécage? Le Chemin ne me donnait pas le droit de revenir en arrière, lorsque ma payse arriverait à cette rade, déjà j'en serais parti, car elle m'était interdite, et avant d'arriver au Pays, météore, à peine aurais-je le temps de rayer du fil d'or de ma course l'espace libre de la pleine mer verte.

La forteresse, la lande, le marécage, le port, la bateau, la mer elle-même, je les ai laissés loin derrière moi. A peine étais-je ici, déjà j'étais ailleurs, puis ailleurs, puis encore ailleurs, et toujours ailleurs, mais quand donc arriverais-je au Pays? De ce lieu où je me trouvais j'avais été chassé pour un

autre lieu dont je suis chassé et le lieu où je vais arriver lui aussi me chassera, mais pourquoi donc n'entrais-je pas au Pays? Je n'étais pas condamné à la déportation, tout au contraire seul le séjour de la patrie m'était permis, aller au Pays était nécessaire, pourquoi donc ne pouvais-je sortir de cet exil où il me serait toujours défendu et impossible de vivre? La Loi d'exode ne restait pas lettre morte, à chaque instant l'ordre d'expulsion était appliqué: toujours j'étais chassé dehors, pourtant je ne parvenais pas au Pays, mais je me retrouvais toujours dehors et seulement en exil, pourquoi donc la Loi ne parvenait-elle pas à être exécutée? Quel était donc cet espace qui tout ensemble m'était interdit, mais où je continuais de vivre? Où donc étais-je?

Je n'étais plus à terre, mais, puisque je n'étais pas encore au Pays, n'étais-je pas toujours et seulement dans leur entre-deux parmi l'espace du port? Était-ce la marée basse? La mer se tenait-elle toujours retirée au loin? Étais-je sur un bateau devenu incapable de prendre la mer ou même toujours destiné à naviguer à l'intérieur du port? J'étais en partance, j'étais chassé loin du port, tout bateau même en pleine mer m'était interdit, mais, puisque je n'arrivais pas au Pays, n'étais-je pas encore et seulement à l'intérieur du port, sur un bateau à quai, et même peut-être n'étais-je pas encore embarqué? Comment était-ce en même temps possible? Toute la terre et toute la mer avaient été envahies par une Ville-flottante.

Étais-je enchaîné sur l'un de ses pontons? Je n'étais le prisonnier d'aucune guerre, tout au contraire dès le début de mon voyage le Pays m'attendait, à chaque instant j'étais brutalement délié et de tout ponton j'émergeais si vite que nulle part on ne pouvait me saisir ni me voir, pas même l'enfant, le ponton où j'arriverai dans cent mille siècles lui aussi me chassera, mais sa Loi d'expulsion, comme celle de tout ponton futur, je la connaissais déjà, la peine ne pouvait plus être aggravée puisqu'elle se répéterait indéfiniment la même, elle venait à ma rencontre et elle me submergeait, ainsi n'étais-je pas comme admis par cette Ville-flottante?

Je n'étais pas né dans cette Ville-flottante, je ne connaissais jamais le bonheur de son séjour, je ne pouvais même pas y être admis au titre d'Étranger-en-souffrance, car je n'étais pas encore le ressortissant d'un Pays, ma patrie future

me réclamait, et c'est pourquoi cette ville étrangère, mais alliée au Pays, ne pouvait abroger sa Loi d'expulsion, car je n'avais pas encore accompli la migration pré-nuptiale de ma propre naissance. La Loi ne dérogerait jamais de sa rigueur, elle ne pouvait admettre, même pour un seul soir, que je dresse ma tente sur un ponton, mais, si elle avait toute force pour me chasser, puisqu'elle ne me donnait que l'espoir et était impuissante à me faire arriver au Pays, nomade ivre de jeûne ne serais-je pas sans repos ballotté de ponton en ponton, et ainsi, en dépit de sa Loi, la Ville-flottante n'était-elle pas obligée de souffrir parmi son espace interdit et repoussant ce Vagabond chassé de place en place?

La Loi ne pouvait m'accorder aucune part, pas même une condamnation à un exode perpétuel, et pourtant de facto elle me tolérait, comment était-ce possible? Pourquoi donc l'interdit de cette Ville-flottante, sous lequel j'étais condamné à ne pas vivre, ne parvenait-il pas à être levé? J'étais chassé hors de ce ponton, mais ce prochain lieu où j'allais arriver ce ne serait toujours pas le Pays, seulement un ponton, lui aussi interdit, mais, si cette Ville-flottante avait envahi toute la mer et toute la terre par-delà tous les horizons même futurs, l'espace de ma fuite serait toujours moins grand que l'immensité de cette plaine rase et branlante, je répéterais indéfiniment le premier pas, et ainsi, dans la mesure même où la Loi s'appliquerait, elle me consentirait encore une part, après la dernière, au-delà de la pauvreté, part impure qui ne m'aurait pas été donnée, dont je n'aurais pas voulu m'emparer, mais que j'aurais cependant usurpée: celle de ce faux nom que je n'avais pas le droit de porter, mais que je continuais et continuerais d'endosser: Interdit de Séjour. Pour entrer dans l'innocence, il m'aurait suffi d'accomplir la Loi, mais j'en étais incapable, elle-même ne détenait aucun pouvoir pour m'habiliter à entrer au Pays, et c'est pourquoi, puisque j'étais et serais retranché de tout lieu, toujours absent mais encore présent dans cette Ville-flottante, malgré elle, malgré moi, j'entretenais encore avec l'exil un rapport interdit.

A chaque instant je dérobaï mon faux nom, mais la Loi de proscription s'est appliquée avec une telle célérité que je suis devenu comme absent de moi-même: alors, tant ma solitude était intolérable, j'ai follement désiré me rencontrer

moi-même, me jeter à mes pieds en suppliant: « Emmène-moi d'ici! Emmène-moi d'ici! » Je n'ai pas pu me trouver, je n'ai même pas pu me dire: « Tu brûles », et c'était pour tout moi-même que je cherchais. Alors j'ai ri et je n'ai cessé de rire: je jouais et perdais à cache-mouchoir.

Toutefois si l'enfant, qui n'avait pu me suivre et était partie à ma recherche, avait devancé ma course et se tenait dans un lieu futur, même le plus proche, n'allais-je pas la retrouver et ainsi, dans ce monde où je n'en avais pas le droit, me présenter devant ma Fiancée, et, avant le Pays, la voir pour la première fois mais dans un rapport criminel? Je ne pouvais revenir en arrière, je n'étais plus ici, la Loi m'a interdit même l'accès à tout lieu futur et m'en a par avance repoussé, alors je...

Il a disparu.

Tu as disparu, mais es-tu arrivé au Pays?

Nous avons fini par croire que tu resterais toujours avec nous: nous t'avions appelé le Marcheur, en parlant de toi nous croyions rapporter notre propre histoire, mais, avant même que nous ayons su lire les multiples signes avant-coureurs de ton départ, tu t'es échappé. Tu ne pouvais être heureux parmi nous, mais, à présent que tu t'en es allé, ne devons-nous pas nous réjouir? Sans le savoir, comptions-nous te suivre et déboucher avec toi dans la gloire de tes noces? L'amertume de n'avoir pas été invité est-elle toute notre tristesse? Le Pays n'est pas la Ville, et toi non plus tu ne connais pas la gloire de Jérusalem, mais il nous suffirait d'être sûrs que tu as retrouvé l'enfant et que tu vis maintenant de ton existence propre, pour que ta joie soit la nôtre. Tu as disparu, mais as-tu gagné la Terre natale?

Tu n'es plus dans ce lieu qui n'était pas ta patrie, il ne t'a point mis à mort, car il était l'ami du Pays, comète hyperbolique tu ne reviendras point parmi nous, c'est notre seule certitude, mais te suffisait-il de nous quitter pour gagner la Terre natale? Vis-tu avec l'enfant au lieu où naît la rose blanche? Solitaire, mais vivant, te tiens-tu immobile juste der-

rière l'espace? Es-tu mort, mais du moins en arrivant au Pays? Premier et dernier regard, devais-tu mourir pour voir enfin l'enfant dans un instant unique? Qui peut le dire!

Tu as disparu. Même si c'est par notre faute que tu t'es égaré parmi l'espace de la mort, nous ne pourrons pas te sauver. Maintenant nous ne pouvons plus rien pour toi. Ton Nom? Celui de l'enfant? Celui du Pays? Jamais nous ne pourrons les connaître. Nous ne pouvons plus parler de toi. Ta Légende a pris fin. Absolu est à présent devenu le Secret.

Tu as disparu! Jamais nous ne pourrons nous consoler de ton départ: toujours nous serons en souci de toi. Nous levons les yeux, nous regardons tout là-bas, nous cherchons ta trace, mais nous ne voyons que l'espace vide. Allons-nous pleurer? Ta passion solitaire et enjouée nous a donné l'exemple du courage, et comment pourrions-nous te voir maintenant que tu es vêtu d'innocence! Pourtant tout notre visage s'humecte de quelles larmes? Qu'est-ce donc qui nous oblige à fermer les paupières? Cependant nous avons eu le temps de voir neiger la rosée nocturne et blanche.

Alors nous avons fait un vœu!

JEAN LAUDE

ÉTUDES

I

1 — *Qui suis-je, à ces confins dépossédés par le sable et le vent, comme devant la nappe intacte de la mer, surpris d'une douceur et qui est de la cendre,*

Qui suis-je, en cette chambre et fermant les yeux?

2 — *Une barque s'enfonce en la vase attentive. Ainsi, happé par l'épaisseur, je m'ensable et dérive.*

Comme dépossédé par le fer gris de l'eau,

La neige a goût d'étoile, entre les dents, nuit du métal amer étendue dans la nuit.

Comme surpris d'une douceur, l'attente me divise et me retire de moi-même.

3 — *Le vent. Le vent noir et profond. Mais serait-ce en ce golfe ouvert par le miroir, ainsi le vent immobile.*

Très proche infiniment du centre, interrogeant l'obscur, en solitude, avec cette respiration inquiète et ces images sans images.

Qui suis-je, en cette chambre? Il est un échange équivoque où tremble, dans l'espace des murs simultanés, le présent simple.

4 — *De l'ongle, je dessine une ombre, pour mémoire. Une lueur arrache le papier du mur. Il y a le silence, il y a sur le mur la cicatrice d'un éclair, il y a le silence.*

Je marche dans la chambre, en la ténèbre, il marche. Il n'est en moi, en ce réduit, qu'une parole. Elle se forme.

L'abcès profond. Je vis en ce sommeil de l'arbre usurpé par l'hiver. L'abcès profond de cette chambre. Il est une douceur qui attriste les murs. L'abcès profond de cette chambre est le profond fruit noir.

5 — *Hautes murailles des tempêtes, et j'y cloue un fanal. Grises banquettes suspendues, surface lisse d'un seul gris continu, et je n'entends qu'une voix sans parole.*

Il demande. J'ai demandé. Et rien ne me répond qu'un cri, un cri que l'on isole des basse-tailles de la mer.

Cette chambre, il n'est que cette chambre alternative, arrachée aux ténèbres. Seulement cette chambre et les remparts du temps, seulement ce fanal et seulement ce clou, rouillé, lépreux, qui se délite.

6 — *Le vent fut la banquette, où le temps est captif, la masse infranchissable prise, dans la nuit claire,*

Et l'obscur m'interroge.

L'ombre est d'un seul tenant qui a conquis la houle. Il y a ce silence, Il y a sur la mer, en bordure du ciel, la trace blanche d'un éclair.

(Un cri, ce n'est qu'un cri que l'on isole des basse-tailles de la mer. Le cri meurt, comme un insecte fourbu, entre les lattes.)

7 — *J'approche la lumière dans le gris continu. Une voix sablonneuse qui reflue m'investit.*

Quels profonds mouvements séduisent le silence, d'une sève diffuse? Il n'est que ces remparts à cette chambre confrontés. Le fanal que je cloue les dévoile, terreur.

Et seul, je parle à la parole.

8 — *J'approche la lumière qui retourne à sa source.*

Désir comme une pluie de cendres douces, profond ramier. Le mur bleu, qui le pourrait franchir?

Les gestes ralentis caressent l'épaisseur.

Désir enseveli qui le flatte, braise de soie survivant à sa ruine, désir, naissance à ce désir qu'il convoite en sa ruine, Comme un rapt.

— Je marche dans la chambre, absent. Il est l'attente en moi, très haut. Il est l'attente de ruptures, en moi, très haut l'image blanche qui ne survit que consumée.

(Un chant s'écoute vivre et simplement respire. Il est en moi ce feu très haut, ramier enseveli. Un chant s'écoute vivre et simplement respire. Il est ce feu inaccessible, inaccessible et repaisant.)

Qui suis-je à ces confins, très proche infiniment du centre, happé par l'épaisseur?

— Lente la chambre alternative et divisée, une ombre pour mémoire, une ombre dans la houle. Et le temps s'ouvre comme un fruit.

(Il marche dans l'absence, il demande et la nuit a tracé le chemin. Je demande et rien ne lui répond qu'un cri. L'insecte mort est une horloge. Il divise le temps en poussières ligneuses.)

Toi l'exilé, je vis en ton exil. J'avance vers moi-même, comme l'eau désertée. Cette chambre et cette chambre, aride est le chemin.

La parole s'absente.

II

— Qui passe dans la ville en ruines?

La nuit est haute, sans paroles. Ici diamantaire, et un souffle la brouille. Vêtu d'une question, je marche. Ma tunique dévore. Je marche dans la nuit que je scrute et je suis.

2 — *Le vieux fleuve rouillé comme une épée dans le lit de la ville, un dieu veuf et mouillé dépossède le jour. Il écoute grandir la montée des périls.*

3 — *Elle rase les murs, s'appuyant sur son ombre. Prête à bondir, les yeux rouges, prête au cri, elle s'arrête. Elle insinue l'alerte entre les pierres. Elle s'efface en son ombre de proie.*

4 — *Il n'est pas d'argile, il n'est pas de douceur à la source. L'arbre voyage dans sa graine et c'est rousseur sur l'eau limoneuse endormie.*

5 — *C'est, entre chien et loup, l'odeur du crépuscule. Elle rase les murs. Ainsi passe un nuage et dévore le ciel. C'est, entre vie et mort, une herbe qui hésite.*

6 — *Le feu me déshabille. Mon vêtement de cendres me fait plus clair qu'au coeur. Je romps le battement de la pendule. Je coupe à vif la chair de l'eau. Dans le miroir, je me détruis.*

7 — *Elle est le vent. Elle est, ici, le souci de brouiller. La nuit bascule dans la nuit. Elle est le vent léger qui dérange les ruines. Elle abolit l'étoile. Vite, elle guette.*

8 — *Je songe dans le flux d'un songe. Pierre à mourir debout, ma face est noire. Un tissu de serpents m'enlace. Vêtu d'une question, je brûle, je donne l'or, le vin, l'espace. Et sur la croix de mes abcisses, me suis cloué.*

9 — *Qui passe entre les murs en ruines?*

Le cou tendu, elle attend son cri dans la gorge, la dent froide, les yeux rouges.

Je suis noire, dit la louve.

Elle rase les murs comme approche une idée.

III

Épave déjetée,

C'est témoignage qu'elle porte. Et c'est jadis qu'elle reçut, d'un
unanime chant, la sève lourde.

Telle est la branche noire et maigre, embrumée par l'écume et
le jour qui s'avance à pattes d'araignée.

À la lisière des marées,

Ne suis-je que cette ombre et cette ombre qui parle? En moi,
au loin, mes pas s'effacent.

Telles sont les marées, leur mémoire s'écrit sur le sable qui
cède.

À l'écart,

La nuit m'observe. Il n'y a que la nuit. Et elle me convoite, à
l'extrême lisière où le vent souffle.

Telle est cette forêt, une masse un peu sombre où le soleil est
pris, dans la bordure de la toile.

Épave déjetée à la lisière des marais, et à l'écart.

De ce jour à la nuit, voici la branche noire et seule. En ce
pouvoir qu'elle détient,

Un geste est oublié qui convertit le sable en ce silence

D'éternité.

JEANNE TERRACINI

LE VISITEUR

Tard dans la nuit, quelqu'un frappa à la porte; Sarah se leva et alla ouvrir.

Un vieil homme se tenait devant elle, immobile, une pèlerine sombre jetée sur ses épaules voûtées, le visage émacié et broussailleux.

— Entrez, dit Sarah.

L'homme fit un pas dans la cuisine.

— Qui êtes-vous? demanda Sarah inquiète. Il me semble vous connaître. Que venez-vous faire chez moi à cette heure tardive? dit-elle en scrutant le visiteur.

— Sarah, murmura l'homme avec douceur. Tu ne me reconnais pas? Je suis Benjamin, ton mari.

Il éleva lentement sa main, et appuya son index contre sa poitrine.

— Benjamin, c'est impossible, dit Sarah. Benjamin a disparu depuis des années. Je rêve, ma parole, ajouta-t-elle entre ses dents et elle frotta son visage dans son bras replié.

D'un pas de somnambule, l'homme s'était avancé jusqu'au milieu de la cuisine. Il renversa la tête et reçut l'éclat de la lampe sur toute sa personne.

— Benjamin, Benjamin, cria Sarah. Se peut-il? C'est vrai, tu es Benjamin. Maintenant je te reconnais, c'est bien toi. Assieds-toi, dit-elle en tremblant.

L'homme se laissa tomber sur le banc, posa les coudes sur la table et cacha son visage dans ses mains.

Sarah s'assit en face de lui. Comme autrefois l'horloge effaçait le temps.

— Es-tu fatigué? Veux-tu manger quelque chose?

— Ne me donne rien. Laisse. Je suis très fatigué, dit l'homme en pressant les paumes de ses mains sur ses yeux.

Il respirait profondément comme un nageur. Sarah attendait, haletante elle aussi.

Enfin l'homme laissa retomber ses bras.

— Avant l'aube, dit-il, je m'en irai.

— N'es-tu pas revenu pour rester avec nous?

Il fit non de la tête.

— Mais Benjamin, que t'est-il arrivé? Tu es en haillons. De quoi vis-tu? Tu as laissé ta place ici pour vagabonder?

— Non, Sarah, je n'ai pas laissé ma place. J'ai été chassé.

— Chassé? Que dis-tu? Par qui?

— Il fallait que je parte, Sarah. Je voyais bien que toi et les enfants continuiez à rire, à vivre insoucians, à travailler de bon coeur. Je ne pouvais plus rester parmi vous: c'était un abus de confiance.

— De quoi veux-tu parler Benjamin?

— De tout ce dont tu prenais soin et que tu aimais. La maison, les champs, les enfants. Toi, tu étais faite pour cela. Moi non! Je suis vieux très vieux...

— Tu mens, dit-elle avec la fougue ancienne. Tu es parti parce que...

— Crois-moi Sarah, je ne peux pas mentir. Je te jure que je ne pouvais pas faire autrement.

— On peut toujours faire autrement.

— J'ai lutté longtemps.

— Pas assez il faut croire.

— J'ai agi par loyauté.

— Pour qui nous as-tu quittés? dit-elle avec rancune.

— Pour personne. C'est si loin... Souviens-toi, je n'ai rien emporté. Je suis parti à l'aube, j'ai marché droit devant moi.

Au bourg, les gens me reconnaissaient et m'interpellaient: « Eh, Benjamin! » J'ai traversé des campagnes, des villages, des forêts, des hameaux, des villes, jusqu'à la mer. J'ai navigué.

— Tu as navigué, toi, Benjamin, un paysan, un sédentaire? Je ne te crois pas.

— J'ai navigué longtemps et loin. J'ai vu tous les pays.

— Tu t'employais pour gagner ton pain?

— Oui.

— Toi, le Maître, tu as préféré travailler pour les autres? T'engager, te louer contre un salaire misérable? dit-elle méprisante, quand ici il manquait de bras et quels bras.

— C'était mieux ainsi.

— Tu trouves? Et pendant ce temps, moi, seule avec les enfants à élever et mon chagrin, seule pour tenir tête à tout: aux inondations, à la grêle, à la sécheresse, aux tempêtes. La neige, les gelées...

— Je sais!

— Tais-toi, tu ne sais rien! La maladie, le bétail, les assurances, les taxes, la guerre, la mort.

— La mort?

— Bien sûr la mort. Tu ne l'as pas prévue?

— Qui a été touché?

— La dernière, celle qui portait ton nom. Du typhus, il y a sept ans, jeta-t-elle crûment. Toi, tu naviguais.

Benjamin baissa la tête et murmura:

— Ici, je n'étais plus utile à rien ni à personne.

Il s'arrêta essoufflé, puis reprit doucement:

— La petite parcelle en litige avec le séminaire, qu'en as-tu fait?

Sarah le regarda longuement, puis ouvrant ses mains sur ses genoux, les épaules lasses:

— J'ai cédé.

— Tu as cédé?

— Il ne fallait pas peut-être? dit-elle sur la défensive. Après ton départ, il y a eu des pressions, la municipalité s'est emparée de l'affaire. Ils sont puissants, ils ont décidé l'expropriation. J'ai dû céder.

— Mais comment?

— J'ai dû céder comme ils l'ont voulu, pour un morceau de pain.

— C'est du vol.

— Je sais.

Ils se turent à nouveau, puis Benjamin frissonna:

— Avez-vous fait des transformations?

— Bien sûr. Les choses ne sont plus ce qu'elles étaient quand tu les as quittées. Tant d'années! Tes fils sont devenus des hommes. Il y a eu des changements.

— Mes fils, dit-il. Lequel me ressemble?

— Aucun!

— Ici dans la salle rien n'a changé.

— Ici, non. Tout est à sa place habituelle. Mais ailleurs...

— Où cela ailleurs? demanda-t-il en lui lançant un regard aigu. La petite cour?

Sarah acquiesça.

— On l'a supprimée?

— On l'a démolie, reprit-elle lentement. Il le fallait. Nous avons construit des hangars, acheté du matériel moderne, comme nos voisins.

— Tous ces changements, pourquoi Sarah?

— Ces changements étaient nécessaires.

— La petite cour n'existe plus?

— Tu y étais donc attaché? Et tu l'as quittée?

— En montant dans l'allée, malgré l'obscurité, j'ai deviné que tout était changé.

— Tu as buté?

— J'ai buté contre des marches nouvelles. J'ai tâtonné et n'ai plus trouvé le mur rugueux. J'ai dû suivre un sentier enjambant plein de traquenards, qui aboutit ici.

— Il n'y a plus de mur. Tu verras demain au grand jour.

— A part l'âtre, il n'y a plus rien qui soit comme avant, dit-il désignant le foyer.

— Rien, dit-elle durement. Tu t'étonnes?

— Non, c'est bien ainsi. J'aurais pu trouver intacte l'angoisse du matin de mon départ: elle s'est dissipée avec le reste.

— Il n'y a que des cicatrices.

— Montre.

— Tiens, dit-elle en écartant l'échancrure de son corsage. Regarde!

— Qu'as-tu fait?

— Avec un couteau. Quand j'ai compris que tu m'avais abandonnée pour toujours, j'ai voulu mourir. J'ai frappé au hasard, ici et là. La colère, la douleur, j'étais folle. Je hurlai; mes voisins sont accourus, ils m'ont désarmée, ligotée, jetée sur le lit.

Dans la nuit je cherchais le couloir le plus court par lequel communiquer avec toi. Mais j'avais à peine le temps d'en percevoir l'entrée que déjà l'aube se levait et qu'il fallait me hâter de revenir à mon point de départ où tant de tâches m'attendaient.

— Ensuite?

— Ensuite? J'ai repris à vivre.

Benjamin baissa la tête. Sarah se tut un moment puis:

— Pourquoi n'as-tu jamais donné signe de vie?

— Sur le papier, le crayon glissait sans marquer.

— Celle que je suis devenue...

— Parle, Sarah.

— Non, rien.

— Chaque fois que tu commences une phrase, un immense espoir se lève, puis tu te tais. J'espère de toi l'inespéré.

— Je ne fais plus d'aumône.

— Ne sois pas inhumaine.

— Qu'attends-tu?

— J'attends des paroles de paix, des paroles qui me soulageraient et au contraire tu m'accables.

— C'est toi le juge?

— Tu n'entends pas que j'appelle?

— Moi aussi Benjamin j'ai souffert. J'ai souffert et pendant si longtemps j'ai épié la porte. Ne me fais pas souhaiter ton départ. Ne m'oblige pas à te prier de me rendre ton absence.

— Continue.

— Tu veux que je consente à ta folie? Tu veux savoir si tu as eu tort ou raison? Cela n'a plus d'importance, dit-elle en haussant les épaules. L'important, c'est ce qui se fait jour après jour.

— Que dis-tu Sarah, chaque jour est une montagne nouvelle à gravir.

— Avec mes mains et ma force, j'ai creusé ma route droite.

— Voici étalée devant toi, ma vie misérable pareille aux pierres délitées des édifices en ruines. Aide-moi à voir l'image de mes jours. J'ai été ici, puis là. J'ai visité des pays où tout m'était étranger, où nul ne me connaissait, où je ne voulais regarder personne de crainte de me faire un ami. De retour à bord, je respirais quand l'ancre grinçait en s'enroulant sur le treuil. Le temps appuyait sur mes lèvres un bâillon.

— Tu parles si bas, je n'entends pas.

— Je me souviens Sarah! Pendant le repos il ne me revenait de ma vie ancienne que des fragments. Le tissu très usé, lâchait dès que je le touchais. Toi qui n'as pas voyagé

tu en sais plus long que moi sur la chaîne des jours et des nuits.

— Tu n'as rien retenu?

— Non. Le soir dans ce moment de pause des marins, les doigts de mes mains s'écartaient et mes prises se noyaient.

— Si tu avais un tel esprit de dilapidation, tu as bien fait de partir, dit Sarah sévèrement et encore mieux fait de ne pas revenir.

— Toi, Sarah, tu as amassé?

— N'est-ce pas ce qu'il faut faire?

— Comme l'araignée au centre de sa toile, tu n'as pas cessé de chasser.

— Que veux-tu dire? J'ai construit un grand mur autour de mon bien. Toi, tu as déserté, tu t'es perdu. Comment pourrais-je tracer le dessin de ta vie?

— Avec ton regard perçant, tu dois y voir clair.

— C'est illisible.

— Déchiffre!

— Je ne connais pas ce langage. Mais toi Benjamin, tu dois savoir comment t'y prendre pour trouver l'issue.

— Il n'y a pas d'issue. Tu l'as dit. Je suis perdu. Les autres y passent aussi. Soudain leur âme prend feu. Je le sais. Quelques uns arrivent à se surmonter. J'aurais pu rester! Pendant longtemps j'ai pensé à mon père, obstiné, bourru, retoussant de toutes ses forces l'amour des siens. Il a tranché ses liens l'un après l'autre, puis il est tombé dans son champ, la face contre terre.

— Mais le père est mort riche, vieux, honoré.

— Il s'était cramponné au versant obscur des jours.

— Toi, Benjamin, qu'as-tu rapporté de tes voyages?

— Rien, je te l'ai dit. Rien que de la poussière et des salets. Tu vois, dit-il en ouvrant ses mains. Les outils, les cordes, les fardeaux...

Sarah murmura pour elle-même:

— Je n'ai jamais quitté la maison et tout à coup je suis fatiguée comme si je n'avais cessé de voyager. La mer pour nous, ce sont les champs de blé et les champs de vigne et les champs de neige et les champs d'herbes folles... Laisse-moi, Benjamin. J'ai donné ma part. Un homme de ton âge devrait avoir honte de s'être laissé détourner de la sorte.

— Je savais que toi Sarah, tu tiendrais.

— Mais Benjamin, que serait-il advenu si moi aussi j'avais abandonné?

— Je ne te demande rien Sarah, ni ton pardon, ni rien. Jadis il y avait un losange découpé dans l'épaisseur de cette porte; le matin il suffisait de lever les yeux pour être ébloui. J'ai voulu moi aussi percer une petite ouverture par où entrerait la lumière.

— Tu as réussi?

— Il m'a semblé parfois y voir clair.

— Quand cela?

— Tout à coup quand j'ai su que je devais partir. C'était un ordre. Comprends! Cette voix ne m'a plus quitté. Elle commande. Parfois elle s'élève et me défie. Je n'écoute plus qu'elle. Comment aurais-je pu rester au milieu de vous comme un étranger? Partout où je vais, cet ordre me précède et me suit. J'ai peur Sarah, je ne rougis pas de le dire.

— Tu n'avais donc pas d'attachement pour nous?

— L'air brûlant desséchait tout.

— Tu déraisonnes. Tu as commis un des actes les plus criminels qui soit et tu veux y lire ton salut!

L'homme se dressa de toute sa taille et sa grande ombre sauta sur le mur au fond.

— Je suis encerclé. Je ne peux pas tricher; aide-moi à reprendre ma cape.

— N'y a-t-il plus en toi une trace de courage? dit la femme.

Elle se baissa pour ramasser le manteau tombé sur le carrelage.

— Ne peux-tu tenir tête?

— Il n'y a rien à faire. J'irai ainsi jusqu'au bout.

— Pourquoi es-tu revenu?

— Tu me croyais mort et en paix Sarah. Je suis revenu pour te dire que je souffre toujours, que l'inquiétude m'étrangle, et que tu as eu de la chance d'avoir pu rester au foyer pour élever nos enfants. L'accès de ma maison m'est interdit. Je suis venu en fraude.

— L'oubli s'était si bien chargé du passé.

— Sarah, si tu pouvais me rendre sourd, peut-être serais-je capable d'occuper ma place ici...

— Ta place! Ce n'est plus la tienne. Tu veux détruire mon oeuvre mais je ne te laisserai pas faire. Tu veux encore

semer le doute, dit-elle avec véhémence, mais je veille. Il y a longtemps que j'ai pris mon parti de ton absence!

— Qui se console n'a pas épuisé les ressources infinies de la douleur.

— Tu ne comprends pas Benjamin, dit-elle en haussant les épaules. Je suis une autre. C'est tout.

— Cette peur, Sarah, si tu voulais l'imaginer, tu pourrais m'aider à la porter, elle serait moins lourde. Réfléchis!

— C'est non!

— Tu refuses?

— Je refuse, dit la femme fermement.

— Tu me laisserais repartir avec mon fardeau?

— Adieu! dit Sarah résolue.

— Dis au moins que tu comprends?

— Il est heureux que tes fils dorment et qu'ils ignorent ce qu'est devenu leur père, dit-elle en ouvrant la porte toute grande.

— Tu ne veux plus me revoir?

— Jamais!

— Bien! Adieu!

Il s'enveloppa dans sa cape franchit le seuil et se perdit dans la nuit.

Longtemps Sarah écouta le crissement des cailloux sous des pas pesants du vieillard.

Debout, le front contre le carreau, les yeux secs, la respiration oppressée, elle avalait une salive amère.

« J'ai longtemps peiné, puis je l'ai arraché de mon cœur comme j'ai patiemment arraché l'ivraie des champs, » se dit-elle en se débattant entre les fils de sa vie régulièrement tendus. « Chaque jour a été un combat pour garder ce qui m'a été confié. Je me suis usée à la tâche et cela ne serait pas suffisant? Il a escaladé le versant obscur, j'ai choisi la clarté. Qui oserait me blâmer? »

Devant elle, la terre émergeait lentement de la nuit comme une promesse. Le matin palpitait contre la fenêtre. Une alouette s'éleva bravement vers le ciel. Le vent nu roula depuis les crêtes des montagnes.

Sarah tendit les bras dans un geste familier d'accueil.

— Voici le jour! dit-elle en ravalant un sanglot.

Le premier rayon de lumière jaillit comme un dard. Sarah tomba en arrière, transpercée.

PIERRE-ALBERT JOURDAN

CE TORRENT D'OMBRES

Tu tirerais du crépuscule
une aile interminable.

G. UNGARETTI

SALUER...

*Cette voix rauque qui éclate dans le chant
ce parfum plus violent à mesure qu'il s'éloigne
cette cendre du ciel où s'exalte la palette de forêt
ce qui n'a pas de forme et passe sur le chemin
semence de parole inviolable souffle éclaté
pont de lumière entre jour et nuit
éclat de menthe sur le gouffre
où s'entassent les butins d'automates.*

*

*Trop grand silence et qui ne cède pas
la truffe de colline sous les pierres
soleil et lune étouffés dans le ciel
invisibles battements d'ailes
l'équilibre en cette absence est brûlure de flamme
un signe d'arbre serait fête délivrerait le corps
avant que toute lumière ne se brise
n'envenime ce parfum de terre aride...*

CE TORRENT D'OMBRES

un visage se ferme à l'incendie du couchant
gagne cette lumière ossifiée ce versant
où l'attire la grande fatigue des pères
rampe vertigineuse et parée pour le gouffre
rosée jeune pluie ou larme
le pied d'arc-en-ciel sur le vide
et toujours une voix s'y implante.

*

Ombre accourue au-devant du chien harcelé
en instant tout s'effondre
avant qu'un souffle d'espérance ne donne forme
cette braise hésitante dans l'apparence de crèche

souffle écho du feu soudain nourri de ce harcèlement
ombre engloutie par la poche de vent
retour des cendres et la voix mesurant
son espace réduit à l'empreinte du pas qui s'éloigne
nid d'abeilles dans l'oreille désaffectée.

*

le pan d'ombre et le ciel d'aucune borne
usage de silex où la flamme du jour se risque encore
ombre de lune égale nuit buissonnée d'argent
polie du geste à cette heure déchirée
ors que la pierre du front s'effrite sous le gel.

*

oiseaux feuilles mortes et le ciel martelé
apparition des ruines et leur source
lumière de l'essaim
oblique du cadran vers une combe d'air
cette sorte de tendresse sous le masque aux lèvres écumeuses
hasardeuse semence de forêt
ivre est aussi ce lent navire d'ombre
vers l'abside de cyprès.

*

*Le feu noircit les pierres assemblées
l'homme est là dans ces traces durables
l'oracle n'approche pas les stigmates de solitude
le vent seul y anime parfois un manège de brindilles*

*le voyageur ne quitte pas le lieu de sécheresse
il caresse cette épopée silencieuse porte secrète
bouche ouverte pour le cri enraciné*

*fougère de passion l'attente brode sur le seuil
un petit monde de fourmis grappille le soleil
l'ombre du voyageur se confond avec l'arbre
qu'il tire vers la plaine
piège dont il sera la victime foudroyée.*

*

*Où le prix de tant d'absence?
la voix revient celle voilée de cette combe obscure
l'aile patiente bouge et s'éteint et se confond avec la pierre
déboulés réfractaires dans l'inconnu de l'herbe grondante
brûlure et joie par ce bond dans les ronces où se terre la
liberté
couloir de taupe l'écoute à la mesure du désir
main d'oreille ne saisissant que feuille desséchée
dans le bruit hallucinant du noyau
libérant l'arbre de destin.*

ELISALEX DE BAILLET-LATOUR

LETTRE

Le 23 décembre, 1958

Cher Antoine,

Je t'écris ici deux mots pour que tu aies l'illusion que l'amitié serve à te donner plaisir, peut-être à t'endormir.

Ton voyage en train, ce soir de Noël, a quelque chose d'irréel. Les tasses à café dans le wagon-restaurant te semblaient pourtant bien réelles, éxaspérantes dans leur banalité. Mais ces voyageurs dans ton compartiment; trois messieurs. Tu avais tout de suite compris qu'ils voyageaient ensemble. Leurs habits avaient un air de famille. Quelle famille! Le premier que tu observas était un nègre. Son regard ne te donna aucune exception. Il était doux, limpide, ce regard qui sortait d'un naufrage en velours noir (il en était revêtu des pantoufles au train). « Melchior », disait-il à son voisin en projetant ses larges mains dans l'air de façon que tu voyais le teint légèrement rose de ses palmes. Tu n'entendis pas le reste de sa phrase dite à voix basse. T'asseyant, tu fermas les yeux. Cette fois, la musique de ce nom prononcé te faisait songer aux lignes de pattes que laissent les oiseaux à la neige.

Tu regardas « Melchior ». Chaque fois que son ami nègre lui lançait son nom, cela le faisait sourire et mettre en jeu les rides de son visage. Tu regardais maintenant mourir cette expression, péniblement et il te semblait que ses sourcils devenaient plus droits qu'ils ne l'avaient été auparavant. Tu ne pouvais pas t'empêcher de penser à ton chien de chasse bien que cela te semblait peu courtois. Peut-être que la crêpe légè-

rement bruyante de sa tunique verte et cape violette te ramenait aux fonds de forêt et à la chasse de beau matin.

Du troisième, tu ne voyais qu'un nez en raccourci. Ce nez surveillait d'un air satisfait un petit perroquet écarlate qui s'étirait sur le porte-bagage. Acrobate et sédentaire, le bec vers terre et le nez en l'air, ils faisaient une splendide paire tout en étant écarlates.

Toi, par peur d'être trop insistant du regard tu te plongeas de nouveau dans les Fables de La Fontaine (en argot).

Ma morale aura l'unique vertu d'être brève. J'aimerais te la dire dans une langue inconnue, pour que toi seul comprenes. De temps en temps il faut les repousser, ces idées perplexes, ce bagage de doutes que nous ne réussissons même pas à perdre dans la confusion des gares. Dans l'étiquette de nos pensées, les pauses sont essentielles, autant qu'en Musique. Noël est une pause, un instant pour regarder à travers la vitre sale d'un train une étoile.

Antoine, réveille-toi!

W. S. GRAHAM

THE DARK DIALOGUES

I

*I always meant to only
Language swings away
Further before me.*

*Language swings away
Before me as I go
With again the night rising
Up to accompany me
And that other fond
Metaphor, the sea.
Images of night
And the sea changing
Should know me well enough.*

*Wanton with riding lights
And staring eyes, Europa
And her high meadow bull
Fall slowly their way
Behind the blindfold and
Across this more or less
Uncommon place.*

*And who are you and by
What right do I waylay
You where you go there
Happy enough striking
Your hobnail in the dark?
Believe me I would ask
Forgiveness but who
Would I ask forgiveness from?
I speak across the vast
Dialogues in which we go
To clench my words against
Time or the lack of time
Hoping that for a moment
They will become for me
A place I can think in
And think anything in,
An aside from the monstrous.*

*And this is no other
Place than where I am,
Here turning between
This word and the next.
Yet somewhere the stones
Are wagging in the dark
And you, whoever you are,
That I am other to,
Stand still by the glint
Of the dyke's sparstone,
Because always language
Is where the people are.*

II

*Almost I, yes, I hear
Huge in the small hours
A man's step on the stair
Climbing the pipeclayed flights*

*And then stop still
Under the stairhead gas
At the lonely tenement top.
The broken mantle roars
Or dims to a green murmur.
One door faces another.
Here, this is the door
With the loud grain and the name
Unreadable in brass.
Knock, but a small knock,
The children are asleep.
I sit here at the fire
And the children are there
And in this poem I am,
Whoever elsewhere I am,
Their mother through his mother.
I sit with the gas turned
Down and time knocking
Somewhere through the wall.
Wheesht, children, and sleep
As I break the raker up,
It is only the stranger
Hissing in the grate.
Only to speak and say
Something, little enough,
Not out of want
Nor out of love, to say
Something and to hear
That someone has heard me.
This is the house I married
Into, a room and kitchen
In a grey tenement,
The top flat of the land,
And I hear them breathe and turn
Over in their sleep
As I sit here becoming
Hardly who I know.
I have seen them hide
And seek and cry come out
Come out whoever you are
You're not het I called*

*And called across the wide
 Wapenschaw of water.
 But the place moved away
 Beyond the reach of any
 Word. Only the dark
 Dialogues drew their breath.
 Ah how bright the mantel
 Brass shines over me.
 Black-lead at my elbow,
 Pipe-clay at my feet.
 Wheesht and go to sleep
 And grow up but not
 To say mother mother
 Where are the great games
 I grew up quick to play.*

III

*Now in the third voice
 I am their father through
 Nothing more than where
 I am made by this word
 And this word to occur.
 Here I am makeshift made
 By artifice to fall
 Upon a makeshift time.
 But I can't see. I can't
 See in the bad light
 Moving (Is it moving?)
 Between your eye and mine.
 Who are you and yet
 It doesn't matter only
 I thought I heard somewhere
 Someone else walking.
 Where are the others? Why,
 If there is any other,
 Have they gone so far ahead?
 Here where I am held*

*With the old rainy oak
 And Carlsburn and the Otter's
 Burn aroar in the dark
 I try to pay for my keep.
 I speak as well as I can
 Trying to teach my ears
 To learn to use their eyes
 Even only maybe
 In the end to observe
 The behaviour of silence.
 Who is it and why
 Do you walk here so late
 And how should you know to take
 The left or the right fork
 Or the way where, as a boy,
 I used to lie crouched
 Deep under the flailing
 Boughs of the roaring wood?
 Or I lay still
 Listening while a branch
 Squeaked in the resinous dark
 And swaying silences.*

*Otherwise I go
 Only as a shell
 Of my former self.
 I go with my foot feeling
 To find the side of the road,
 My head inclined, my ears
 Feathered to every wind
 Blown between the dykes.
 The mist is coming home.
 I hear the blind horn
 Mourning from the firth.
 The big wind blows
 Over the shore of my child-
 Hood in the off-season.
 The small wind remurmurs
 The fathering tenement
 And a boy I knew running*

*The hide and seeking streets.
Or do these winds
In their forces blow
Between the words only?*

*I am the shell held
To Time's ear and you
May hear the lonely leagues
Of the kittiwake and the fulmar.*

VI

*Or I am always only
Thinking is this the time
To look elsewhere to turn
Towards what was it
I put myself out
Away from home to meet?
Was it this only? Surely
It is more than these words
See on my side
I went halfway to meet.
And there are other times.
But the times are always
Other and now what I meant
To say or hear or be
Lies hidden where exile
Too easily beckons.
What if the terrible times
Moving away find
Me in the end only
Staying where I am always
Unheard by a fault.*

*So to begin to return
At last neither early
Nor late and go my way*

THE DARK DIALOGUES

*Somehow home across
This gesture become
Inhabited out of hand.
I stop and listen over
My shoulder and listen back
On language for that step
That seems to fall after
My own step in the dark.*

*Always must be the lost
Or where we turn, and all
For a sight of the dark again.
The farthest away, the least
To answer back come nearest.*

*And this place is taking
Its time from us though these
Two people or voices
Are not us nor has
The time they seem to move in
To do with what we think
Our own times are. Even
Where they are is only
This one inhuman place.
Yet somewhere a stone
Speaks and maybe a leaf
In the dark turns over.
And whoever I meant
To think I had met
Turns away further
Before me blinded by
This word and this word.*

*See how presently
The bull and the girl turn
From what they seemed to say,
And turn there above me
With that star-plotted head
Snorting on silence.*

*The legend turns. And on
Her starry face descried
Faintly astonishment.
The formal meadow fades
Over the ever-widening
Firth and in their time
That not unnatural pair
Turn slowly home.*

*This is no other place
Than where I am, between
This word and the next.
Maybe I should expect
To find myself only
Saying that again
Here now at the end.
Yet over the great
Gantries and cantilevers
Of love, a sky, real and
Particular, is slowly
Startled into light.*

CHRISTOPHER LOGUE

THE STORY ABOUT THE ROAD

I

*She sits and thinks: Near
Is my petticoat but nearer
Is my shift. She watches my mouth,
And because of that I talk
As fast as a sheep — as soon
As the tail is up the turd is out.
Therefore I sit and talk like a fish
With many wonderful things to say
Only my mouth is full of water.
Say: If I flog salt, it rains.
If I sell flour, it blows. Say:*

*Although you strike cold in me,
Only by sitting before me,
Even though you have told me
You are married and well, well
I have written enough about hair
And moon... your hair, somebody's hair...
Full spate... or just a quarter of moon...
Enough about hair and moonlight
To be called a fool.
Nowadays I measure my throat before
I swallow the lie, but*

*Once in on the singing business
 I know of no out
 Save the scythe at the door.
 You have a performer who needs
 Not many entreaties to make him start,
 For he will chant without asking
 To a stray dog or the village pump.
 And yet you ask. So,
 Like a robbed foreigner
 Singing before thieves,
 Let me start and you may lie in bed,
 Tomorrow, say, and think: Lips in love,
 However rosy, must be fed.*

II

*Imagine yourself in a country, poor —
 Not as our is — but poor for better than bread;
 Some men have not worked for ten years;
 Some, the youngest, never; hereabouts, in the sun,
 Go priests; some, good men: most, ambitious enough
 To bless the Lord Mayor's goat in a land
 Shaped like a triangle, set in blue water,
 Owned by less than a thousand men,
 From the folded limestone base of it
 And the cone that smokes up heaven at its top,
 To the water's edge and beyond, the fishes
 And the rain, the hawk hanging in the March rain.*

*Well, one day, off the weekly boat
 That brings mail, tobacco, and news,
 A man called Daniel came to see
 Where his father had worked on the railway.
 A girl was having her third by the pump
 And it died by the pump while Daniel looked
 Shook his big head, walked by and, later that day
 Rented a house in the stinking quarter
 And wrote to his girl: Either come, or it's off.*

THE STORY ABOUT THE ROAD

*It is March. Early spring. Some buy cheap meat:
When it boils you smell their extravagance.
And all day long this Daniel goes about
With questions. And they said: We do not drop
At the shadow of a whip, or the whip... and,
So her child died. What is that? We are brave.
And Daniel — who is cautious — sees their valour
And is glad. But also he saw their trembling hands.
That night a message came, saying: Its off.*

*Night. No moon. It is still and still
Round the small houses with wide throats,
And nobody is out save dogs and... Some, lie awake:
Hearing the motor-launch phut down their coast,
Trawling the fish-thieve's fine nets,
So the newly born are caught with the two year's old,
And the autumn shoal is stolen in the spring.*

*Six weeks of questioning. Soon,
Wherever Daniel goes many children go,
And many police go too. One fisherman said:
Statistic? What's a statistic? Well... From this town
Three hundred and fifty fishermen have received
Up to three thousand years of gaol between them, but
Only one hundred years of school between them.
Even the police laughed until Daniel said:
Tomorrow we strike. They wrote that down.*

III

*Some people has said: He will stay a week
Or a month. He will die, for poverty's catching. Yet,
Two months had gone by and the almond
Had turned when he said: Tomorrow we strike, yes?
Yes. Tomorrow it was. Around dawn. When it rains.
And suddenly everyone started talking at once.*

*Some, who had never gone in a strike before
 Were shy and said to themselves
 What good can it do? Some told themselves
 That Christ would come down and like
 He made bread, make work, if he could.
 However, the nails hold him back.
 And some were determined to go it alone.
 But that night when the people who were shy
 Had gone, and those who wanted a free blessing
 Had gone, and those who saw both sides
 Of the question and wanted therefore
 To go it alone, had gone,
 Those who stayed on went down to sit
 All through the night on the beach like one
 Big stone, without eating, together, like that
 Because Daniel said it was for the best
 If everyone thought together, so
 We sat.*

*And for once the phut phut phut of fish-thieve's,
 Nets and engines stealing next year's shoal
 Didn't sound so terrible, but like
 Sparrows flying out from a low roof during rain.
 Then, around four, Daniel stood up and said
 Why we, workless people, were here and on strike.
 And how, in two hours time, we would walk
 Six miles and work, for nothing,
 All day long repairing the inland road,
 Without breakfast, leaving our knives behind
 In case there was trouble.*

*He has a plain voice, this Daniel. Yet,
 Between the suck of the tide in the Grotto of Dogs,
 And the rain falling for miles into the sea,
 And the fish thieves going away, away...
 It was like a hawk in your head.
 A hawk coming under a low roof during rain.*

IV

*Imagine a stadium halved, by night,
Unlit; the moon is down and rain hides starlight
Or the false dawn that shows far East: almost
No sound except a soft lashing as waves
Snarl smaller waves when they sink among loose
Swags of sea-lace and irish moss. Out there,
Off the right point, the sea gurgles and thocks
In caves: to the left, a long ridged curve
Of orangeries and almond terraces
Mixed in one black swath that twists through darkness,
Tier overlapping tier of them till the land
Declines. And the scent drifts up to heaven,
High and away from the white village
Huddled within a ring of cess-pits, close
To the foreshore overcast with fishscales, glint,
Glint, fishscales and the womanly smell.
Pretty enough by night, you think, for night
Is the blind man's holiday.
And lets imagination out like hairy girls.
But the houses have wide throats,
And the oranges are forbidden.
And there is much thirst at home, for wine is dear,
And the single well is almost dry and then,
Often enough the village piss seeps through
The red earth to only well, and the stones
That might line it are expensive.
Who can call it a lie when people say,
Here, in the chilly north, a hundred miles
Of stinking factories and cities greasing
Up the sky, is a waste, waste land. But here,
The oranges of paradise grow easily and yet
The land is waste, the people thin as leaves.
From the red mountains holding out the coast,
A groove, slipped through the cultivated sides of land
Like a deep scratch straight across the thread
Of a huge screws mould, and known to all as
The inland road, comes down hard between*

*Those still houses. Then, near the last of them,
 It joins a fine new tarmac rim, known as
 The costal road, much used by mechanised
 Visitors and those who own big lorries, say
 For two or three months each year. Summertime,
 And the inland road is one dead pipe;
 Thick dust up to the hubs of a cart, dust
 Fine as smoke round your nose and eyes. Winter,
 And the inland road is one dead limb;
 Red mud up to the hubs of a cart, tiles of it,
 Bending you low enough to see backways.
 And on the floor of it, all year round,
 Stones like watermelons, flints big as a spade.
 And people use this road all the year round,
 Visiting, paying respects, or fetching news.*

V

*Half six. No cockcrow yet and the morning star
 Half hidden by the rain. We stood and prayed a bit.
 And Daniel said again why we were striking:
 Not in a symbolical, but a real action,
 Not for money, but to show we can work,
 And that not to work is a crime against oneself, yes,
 Tuesday we fast, Wednesday we feast off work,
 And we moved off. Three hundred men like an ant
 Trundling a stone eight times bigger than itself
 In the half-light, mist, like an ant, mist
 Climbing around the mist, and through it, like an ant,
 The rain falls gently down the folded rain.
 Up through the village, up, like an ant
 With one big thought, and the doors creak
 Until the cock wakes up: gates bang till daylight.*

*One man, a carter, who came from a street
 That had thirty people in gaol for murder
 And things... and who really had nothing*

*To strike about but came because his mother
Insisted, sang us the carter's song:*

*O moon, O moon,
O soldier moon,
I had rather you
At my back tonight,
Than the king and all
His cavalry...*

*Which was fine except there was no moon,
And a mile from the beach we split,
Going different ways to the place we had chosen,
So as not to disturb the police.
Frost on low ground. Pity on our feet
And the frost, to break the crinkled face of it.
Yet we did, but softly, coming by various paths
To the place we had chosen. And started work.*

VI

*Seven. Less rain and the sun like a steel plate
Behind the clouds. Now and again it glints
Off the mattocks as we clear out stones
As big as melons for dyking the side of the road.
Mud to you knees. But the work goes well, well
Enough to show on a hundred yards after two hours.*

*Nine. The sound of lorries down the costal road.
Will they pass or turn? Will they wait
In the village or come to us, up the inland road?
They turn. They come as near as they can. Then, walk.
The police. Seven hundred of them. With guns.*

*Now the rain has stopped and by ten
We have cleared a little more of the road,
Ringed by police and, like the metal washer
On a tap, between us and themselves
Their guns point down our necks or backs,*

*Depending on how you work. Then, an officer,
 Neat, slimly dressed, fresh as a... well,
 A fine-boned, short, well perfumed man, white gloved,
 And with a little pistol on his forefinger,
 Stepped forth and said in his educated voice:
 Stop work. I order, stop this work.
 We felt like soldiers caught by enemies in war
 Who must put down their arms or die.
 Stop, or we shoot. And we did not stop.*

*Say nothing... Daniel said, and his whisper stood.
 And the officer fired once, into the sun.
 So Daniel said, wiping the mud off his mouth,
 We will sit down and rest. So all sat down
 In a great circle, to the hams in mud, yes,
 It was cold. You could see your face in pools.*

*Eleven, and getting warm. The officer said:
 You see this trumpet, yes? Well,
 After I sound it thrice you will go home.
 He slipped the button on his glove and stood
 Upon a stone as big as fifty melons
 And blew thrice. But nobody moved.*

*Very well, if that's your attitude... We'll see.
 And handing down the trumpet he was handed down
 After it, and flicked his boot and went to see.
 High noon. Overhead, the sun like a lid from a copper,
 And the bald cuckoo drew a cross
 Against the soaring lark. But nobody moves.*

*Then, led by the little officer, they pushed
 Among our faces with their knees and came
 Into the middle and stood, black stamens,
 Round where Daniel sat.
 You have come a long way to visit me, he said.
 Get up, they said. And Daniel lay right down,
 Six high feet of him flat in the mud
 And his glasses flashed like hands. Pick him up,
 The officer said, and, poor fellows, they tried,*

*But he weighs heavy and they, poor fellows
Are not paid much:
And most of that goes on the uniform.*

*In the end it took seven men who got
Dirty as hell. Seven men holding him face downwards,
Three hundred yards to the car. And he said:
You are hurting. And eighteen more were taken off,
Like volunteers in the army...
And the charge against Daniel and the rest, was:
Trespassing on public property. So we got
Ten years apiece and shared a cell
With eight condemned to death as bandits,
Greedy watching two cats on the roof,
While the wireless set gave a boxing match,
And on the wall was carved: Omnia vincit amor! yes,
Omnia vincit amor. Don't you fret,
The turnkey said: You're not like them —
Meaning the bandits: I promise,
By the time they're shot, you're out.*

*And a number of famous writers came, wise men,
Whom Daniel trusted. And the Communists came,
Making a great to-do up the leg of the land,
And got a deputy in on the strength of it,
And we got out. Late autumn. Home. Fresh bread.
Better of course than the gaol where old men pine
For the end of their frail fetid breath.
But the oranges remain forbidden.
The water rushes back into the sea.
The fish thieves trawl all night, and,
Unless you have friends, work is hard come by.*

*That winter a writer, the best, it was said,
Came and explained in plain words
What was wrong with the land and people. But,
In the end he went off, as he said,
With enough material for a dozen books.*

*And the red leaves shine so bright
The wings of flying birds are scorched.*

OLIVER BERNARD

HIS CHANSON FOR ROLAND

To R.S.W.

This is for you who ask me why
I write to Roland a disguise
It was for Rosalind I went
Walking up to my knees and eyes
In beauty on that May morning

*A nightingale the night before
Showed me a complex stanza form
Windless and between the hedges
Scented night was almost warm
Grass gently breathed cow-parsley sighed*

*O nightingale I said and laughed
How you can sing and sing and go
On singing it reminds me of
Those lovers in Boccaccio
Who pale as dawn paled fell asleep*

*But next morning a little while
Before I was awake I heard
In misty woods and miles away
Through the grey twilight a grey bird
Saying cuckoo slowly over*

*Then was our great green and gold
Morning oh my Roland we*

*Killed no Saracens no king
Sent us help too late for he
Has slept in stone a thousand years*

*A dream of morning but a dream
Of all my life till now Roland
How all our battles back to back
Disguise this walking hand in hand
Peacetime when we are ourselves*

*I alone and you beside me
Roland imaginary friend
What do we care for Paradise
Or Christ his heaven in the end
When the fighting is forgotten*

*Who but the birds sang when I left
The village all behind and who
Was there after those two children
By the bridge they were the two
Lucky ones I saw the last*

*Along the creek the water smiled
The marsh birds cried disconsolate
A brace of sheld duck and a half
Flew long uneasy where the mate
Of the odd one did not fly*

*But in the reeds the singing sun
And swinging on a stalk there sang
Louder and higher on the stem
A sedge bird that cried out and sprang
Into the air and off the stave*

*Beyond the mill I wondered if
The blackflies stung like horseflies did
But I went on and forgot
Some birds sang some shy birds hid
A weasel crashed into the reeds*

*I went walking fast and soft
There was wind enough to take
Down-wind mansmell I looked up
Into the long reeds a snake
Escaped my eye but traced a sound*

*Between the forest and the wooded
Slopes into the heart of that
Lonely valley into lonely
Ages I went while on flat
Silver lakes the sun poured life*

*Stone still stood two herons two
Swans floated as silently
As reflections two beneath
Looked at them admiringly
Two above dipped forward beaks*

*Flittered above the lake at noon
What but a bat and hunting high
First this year and woke too soon
Warm that morning was to fly
In soft air over bright water*

*Warm that morning I forgot
Eighteen winters of a long
Battle and the spear came out
Of my side like all the wrong
I have ever thought I suffered*

*A bittern boomed his thrice his once
Gently the wind brought me across
The dry reeds such a smell of woods
Le vent me dit tu n'es qu'un gosse
I went to school again I was*

*Head over heels in love against
A tree as lovely as a girl
Lovely as language or the life*

*Springing between my legs a whirl
In my head what could I write*

*O Trees I cannot remember
Any more the forest smell
Was the same but since that time
There had been smoking shame as well
Spots not on the skin but still*

*Growing up a fuzz of shady
Dealing on a spoilt face
Financial crisis and removal
From the last school falls from grace
Vomit stains venereal terror*

*Homosexual guilt I ran
Away from home at sixteen years
Old to join the Air Force and the
Communist Party all my fears
Pushed to a certainty of dogma*

*Ran away from Holland Park
Worked for a living lived alone
Brunswick Square Beethoven's Fifth
All but the second movement own
Doorkey meat ration on Sundays*

*Dabbled in the realms of love
In between bouts of Party work
Box Hill Sundays air-raid nights
Bombs and gunfire only jerk
Survivors into liveliness*

*Slumbered all those years of war
Dreamless sleep I do not say
Spoke at meetings practised forced
Landings but thanks for this May
Which is a permissive month*

*Who or what is that a harsh
Voice said far above my head
Two bronze herons symbols of
Longevity should have been dead
Pterodactyls have gone out*

*Smiling I went up into
The woods the path gave out the damp
Under those trees never dries
Sticks cracked I wished I was a tramp
Once but I have been one since*

*Well I didn't care to be
Anything or anyone
Just then coming up the woods
It was enough to feel the sun
When I came out of the shade*

*Dream of a morning all my life
Between had waited for till then
Roland the robin sang as loud
As boys who shout they will be men
Longtailed tits chinked in the birches*

*Butterfly Bombs a notice said
A purple sanded cart-track ran
Down the forest side the pines
Close and dark and nothing can
Grow beneath but layers of needles*

*Down the road a pheasant crossed
Why I wondered then a hare
Started from the fence and ran
Looking round I was still there
Well I could laugh at anything*

*Past the gate the grass was soft
Walking but I was aware
Of a noise of men and thought*

HIS CHANSON FOR ROLAND

*Should I really have been there
Forestry Commission land*

*How can I explain I crossed
The firebreak where they loaded this
Lorry I could hear them talking
See their faces could they miss
Seeing me I walked as if*

*They had not been there at all
Quietly because I was
Walking quietly before
Well I think it was because
I was invisible just then*

*Roland this was our exploit
So I share the spoils we won
That is but companionship
One hour after noon the sun
Stood when I saw the nightingale*

*Heard it and then saw it sing
Changing twigs at each new verse
In a bush under a goldleaved
Poplar may the dreadful curse
Of silence fall on me if not*

*After that do you suppose
I cared a cock pheasant exploded
Under my feet the pigeons in
The pines clapped gave me away but oh did
I care any more I said*

*You should have been here but then
I couldn't tell you now besides
If you had we'd have made noise
More than I did and what hides
Hides from two more than from one*

OLIVER BERNARD

*The Pyrenees are black and cold
All winter and the infidel
Lusting after Paradise
Wave on black wave Roland well
We have been friends without the fighting*

*This was our great green and gold
Morning oh my Roland we
Killed no Saracens no king
Sent us help too late for he
Has slept in stone a thousand years*

ROBERT CULFF

A CHILDHOOD WITHOUT CAPS

The winter trees across the road looked like gas-rings stuck at random in the black front lawns. From my window, I could see a bird being watched by a cat as it sharpened its claws on an amputated branch, a terrier watching the cat through a fence, and a woman behind the curtains of No. 14, watching the terrier.

Everyone watching or being watched by everyone — it was unnerving. I too, could feel the imprint of eyes on the back of my neck, as I sat banging my Remington Portable. I had been too close in the room before, with sweet smells of fruit, dying flowers and monkey; so I had opened the window, hoping to stop myself from falling asleep. The traffic noise, or perhaps the fresh air, had woken Sally: I could hear her stealthily moving about in her cage; I could feel her sharp little eyes drilling.

« For Pete's sake! For Pete's sake can't you die for an hour or two, and let me get started at least, on this writing machine? »

It was a mistake to address Sally — it always is a mistake to address Sally, as I remembered too late. There was a thud and crash as she landed on the back of my chair.

I ignored her: I looked out determinedly. The *Gothique* façades of the houses opposite offered no sign; the blind awnings rose secretly in jagged tiers to the slate-grey roofs and a jaundiced heaven. A car swished by, travelling the oily

surface of the road like an image in a dream: just too fast to be caught by eye or mind. A door banged, but no one came out or went in. The present was a cameo of grey on grey.

« Without caps? » asked Sally, spelling out the title-page.

« Those round things schoolboys wear. Round and coloured all colours, with embroidered shields in front. You must have noticed them in the street, Sally — on the heads of young males. »

We paused to think of schoolboys; then, when the silence threatened to become too exquisite (as it often does when Sally registers disapproval) I added: « Worn on head, carried in hand, snatched in fun, crumpled in pocket, torn of lining, hidden in spite, kicked in hate, lost in a wood, mislaid in a locker, loved in vain or in vanity, hated inordinately, peed on occasionally, stolen often, outgrown periodically — every schoolboy has to have a cap: they *all* do. »

« Oh? » Sally murmured, as she settled on my shoulder. « And if they all do, and certainly they all seem to — though some are quite quite hideous, the caps *and* the boys, or the effect of particular caps on particular boys, or the effect of particular boys under particular caps — why without? »

« Because the striking thing about my childhood was the absence of any sort of cap on my expanding infant skull. »

A painful silence followed, while Sally considered: painful with the certainty she would not be satisfied. A blue-bottle flew in through the open window, through stripes of light and shadow; Sally swiped at it with a hairy hand, and missed. Her short temper shortened perceptibly.

« It's not the sort of title likely to bring the money in, » she said. « Nothing like *Forever Amber* now. To tell the truth, I'm disappointed in you, dear boy, for thinking it up — yes very disappointed! It just goes to show how wrong one can be about a friend. Here was I, thinking what a knowing one you had turned out, and all the time you're no better than a wee babe in arms — leastways, not as far as this art racket is concerned. And what about that cap, anyway? Why wasn't there one? »

« Because there wasn't any school. No school, no cap — that's logical, at least. Out there in the Argentine, on the Pampas where the gauchos come from, and where I lived,

There were no schools near enough or suitable enough for me. So I didn't go to one — or have to wear one.»

«It doesn't sound much like a childhood to be written about. Besides, they're so *dull*, Robert, those sagas about nice little sensitive middle-class boys with or without caps. They're always being written up, over and over again — by *everyone*, dear boy! You're quite a passable painter, Robert, so why waste time fiddling about with that old typewriter, which is as rock as you say yourself, and best left alone. I *know*, for I once caught a toe in it, and you may do the same if you don't watch your step. I've given you fair warning — fair and square — and don't say I haven't.»

«And I give you fair warning, Sally: if you don't stop pulling the hairs out of my ear, I'll fetch you a wallop, and bring you back in your cage.»

Sally tweeled a last hair, held it daintily between finger and thumb, eyed it gravely, and then sucked the end like a duchess eating asparagus — for Sally aspires to gentility, even if she forgets herself on the furniture when I am absent-minded or indulgent enough to feed her outside her cage.

«I'm going to keep an eye on your work as it goes along, anyway,» said Sally, doing a Nijinsky back to bed. «For you're not to be trusted, and that's God's own truth, as you know and I know from experience — more's the pity, say I. Goodnight now, and don't go hitting that old Remington all night, or it will break down, poor thing, and mind out with those keys, for they cut like hell! Goodnight once again. Goodnight.»

The first thing to remember about the Argentine, or Argentina, Sally, is its size. People are always saying how huge it is, and how many times the countries of Europe can be fitted into it — especially the Americans, who have a passion for comparative statistics, like putting ice-cream wafers end to end to the moon and back.

Out there on the Pampas the effect of size is terrifying and absolute. The horizon is visible and flat all the way round, and the few trees and houses, if there are any at all, look like inadequate bits of scenery put up absent-mindedly

on an empty stage. We children took this for granted when we got there, and it didn't distress us; but I have often wondered how Sanger and Mita survived their first few months — maybe that's why they were always talking about the green lanes and pretty meadows of Good Old England.

The Argentine absorbed our family in two instalments: first Sanger, then a couple of years later, Mita, brother Alan and myself. It was nineteen twenty-something when the *Andes* steamed into Rio bay; and there we were, hanging over the rail, looking at the town, the sugar-loaf mountains and the little boats scattered like seeds on the water. Mita said, « Look out for your Daddy who has come here to meet us half way. » And there was Sanger, standing on the quay in his best white ducks, with a Panama hat on his head — only I didn't know who he was, until Mita pointed him out, and told me.

But my *real* father was a photograph in a silver frame which used to stand on the dressing-table in Mita's room, back in England. Suspecting an incomprehensible grown-up joke, I smiled unbelievably.

Yes indeed! But then, there's always a doubt sandwiched between a father and a son. A man's too much yourself to be accepted readily as a father; be he dark as you are fair, heavy as you are light, broad as you are narrow — he's still you too nearly. You're one of a million seeds he has scattered — you know it, but you'll never believe it; never. An obscure cell in your brain keeps nagging. « Perhaps it isn't true, after all, » it insists.

And, maybe there is truth in your scepticism. As the past is the past, so nothing can be stated with certainty. As soon as it's over an event becomes a legend, with mystery like a cellophane wrapper, coming between you and it — and distorting, for all its transparency. The projector of the past clicks over: you're aware of light and dark, sun and shadow, but there's no controlling the image, no deciding what you will find. A picture comes into focus, arbitrarily, a panting dog perhaps, making a hole for itself in the cool earth to lie in; or hens staggering in sunlight with beaks open and little triangular tongues hanging out. A boy with water-straight hair falling in his eyes, comes down a long avenue towards you, down the steep perspective of the years, and you suddenly

cry out, like someone watching a newsreel, « Coo! Look — that's me! »

When the *Andes* was tied up and the gangway lowered, Sanger came on board, and said, « Welcome to South America! » He kissed us all, starting with Mita, and finishing with her again. This made me dizzy with jealousy — a novel experience, for I had only felt moderately green-eyed when Alan or baby Anthony stole too much of Mita's attention; and Anthony was dead now (poor little thing!) and Alan might die sometime — but I knew that this great tower of a man with his black hair, black eyes and black moustaches would never die.

« Well? » said Sanger, patting my head.

« Well I shall kill you, then, » I whispered behind an answering simper.

But, in spite of this greeting, I think Sanger and I would have established a more or less satisfactory relationship — or at least, called an armistice. But there was one obstacle, and this was Sanger's definite and inflexible ideas about bringing up a family. (If you are interested in his ideas, you have only to pick up a book of psychological case-histories, and read about them there). Alan and I thought of him as of Jupiter, who might — and usually did — begin scattering thunder-bolts, ten times or so a day, but unfailingly at the meal table. In consequence I lost my appetite, and have remained what is called a 'light eater' ever since.

It was about this time that Alan began to wet his bed and howl every night. I suppose this was a form of protest; the more so perhaps, because Sanger had forbidden the night-night we had been used to, but which he said would *ruin us or life*. In retaliation, Sanger developed a habit of leaping into our room in his pelt in the middle of the night, plucking Alan out of his cot, turning him over, tanning his sit-me-down, and popping him back with the words, « That'll give you something to cry about, you little devil. Ruining my night's rest! If you don't shut up within five minutes, I'll come back, and give you *both* a thrashing next time! »

This wasn't perhaps, as unreasonable as it may sound, really. Being startled out of sleep by the advent of Sanger, half terrified by the sight of him brandishing a candle in his left

while his right dealt with Alan's bottom, and never forgetful of the fact that it's bad form for one child to remain silent while another is exercising his lungs, I used always to bellow in opposition.

But as soon as Sanger had gone, I had sense enough to stop. I knew that unless Alan stopped too, and at once, there would be trouble for both of us. (Sanger, like you Sally, never made a threat he hadn't the way and the will to carry out). So I invented a game, and it was played like this: I used to hold up my hand in the dark, and say, « I say Alan, can you see this hand? » And after a pause, during which I could sense my brother's efforts to control himself, he would answer, « No — can you? » And I'd say, after staring into the dark a while, « No! » Then I would hold up the other hand, and ask, « Well, can you see *this* hand? » Alan would look for a long time; then he would admit that he couldn't. The procedure could be gone through with all the pieces of anatomy I had to hold up — but, long before I ran short, Alan would have fallen asleep, lulled by the long pauses and the staring into darkness. This accomplished, I would sigh with relief, tuck my nose into the cosiness under the sheets, and soon be asleep myself.

I mustn't however, give you the impression, old dear, that this was an extraordinarily unhappy childhood I suffered, with nothing but cowering from Sanger and psychological stresses all round. No, it was also a great period of developing. Apart from Spanish — which we mastered with no effort I can remember — we became quite able horsemen, learned to skin a dead sheep and shear a live one, kept instructive rabbits, developed a taste for *maté* and red wine: and even acquired the knack of reading simple words in large print.

There were about a dozen grown-up bachelors on this *estancia*, all ready to teach us something, and most of them could be persuaded to spoil a couple of enterprising boys. The weather too, was designed for running wild in — sun every day; though it snowed that first winter, but not much, and even while it snowed the sun shone; and we went out in it, with no danger of catching colds, or worse flu, like you do and I have, over here.

Mita's sister Ida came out about a year later to see how we all did. Sanger said she was as suspicious as an old maid

in tin drawers, for he knew she really wanted to find out how he was treating her sister. As soon as Auntie Ida tripped over our Welcome mat, the quarrels began, and Sanger forgot all about training Alan and me; the new enemy was too powerful to allow him to divide his forces. Yes, they were always snickering and snarling at one another, slamming and hammering away all and every day. It was unnerving — for no one was ever the winner.

Auntie Ida was only about four foot tall, but she was proud in and of every inch, and considered herself a match for anyone. She was — for her tongue was definitely man-sized. « Poison comes in small packets, » she once said of herself, and Sanger retorted, « It's you that's saying it, old girl. But don't mention the stuff — you're giving me dangerous ideas. »

One day I remember, they were warring over the breakfast table as usual — it was about the rights of women, I think, and suffragettes. I had no idea what suffragettes were, and I am sure I cared little for the rights of anyone but myself; but I soon became very angry indeed — emotional states and storms are catching, you know — especially when Sanger whipped across with, « Why, you're as ignorant as the rest of this damn ignorant family of mine!

« You should get yourself a man, and stop talking nonsense about things you know nothing about! » This made poor Auntie Ida burst into tears and call him an ignorant brute.

There being a dish or *compotier* of oranges at hand, I snatched up the largest — and suddenly hurled it at Sanger's head. Luckily, I was too irritated at the time to aim with any accuracy, and the orange, instead of landing where I intended, hit my Auntie Ida plumb in the eye. There was a pause called significant while the three of us looked at each other with mutual hatred: then Sanger gave a great bellow of rage, grabbed hold of my shoulders, and hoisted me out of the room. But instead of giving the thrashing I expected, he just tossed me down the passage with a perfunctory flip round the ear, and went back in good spirits to watch my Auntie's eye blacken up — which it did nicely.

Mita was very disturbed over this incident, and took me aside to explain that people who didn't learn to control their

tempers as children, got worse and worse as they grew older, and ended by *killing* someone in a rage, being tried for murder, and hanged till they in turn were dead. This alarmed me terribly at first; though later it gave me a sense of destiny and importance, and I went about, watching myself for signs of what I was certain would be my ultimate fate.

Remembering back to those early years is like looking at a landscape, and seeing only the tops of a few highly-coloured peaks of experience sticking up through a sea of forgetfulness: but these islands, reason insists, were once only a part of a continuous and gently undulating countryside. Life must have gone on there, dully and uneventfully enough; though now all that remains is a series of catastrophies and earthquakes and cataclysms with me, that precocious Bobby, down-stage and in the limelight, all the time. The world exists only in our egocentric selves — which, if true of grown men and women, is certainly true of a boy in his morning years, between seven and eight.

Talking of precocity, Sally, reminds me to warn you of what you do or say in front of a child; for it is a sad mistake to suppose that children are less observant than adults. The truth is, they don't miss a single detail, having not learned to as grown-ups have after much suffering and many agonies.

As a boy, I kept my eyes and ears open wide all the time; consequently I was always feeling superior when I was told of things I already knew about — like the time the Manager of the *estancia* married Miss White. This was a great surprise to everyone else, for the Manager was a gay bachelor of forty-two, whose joy it was to have shoals of people stay at his house, so that he could run fancy-dress dances and tennis-parties and shoot partridges with them.

Well, Miss White got her man during one of those parties, and it happened while Mita — dressed in her black evening frock with a few silver-paper stars added, and wearing a crescent moon on a band round her forehead (to represent The Queen of the Night) — was dancing a passionate tango with Mr. Armitage (as Pirate Chief). Just as the dance ended, when the pirate dropped to one knee, and Mita perched on the

other, on the tip of her black satin evening shoe, I saw Miss White catch hold of the Manager's hand, and pull him through the French windows, out into the night; but no one else saw the incident, all eyes being on Mita and her beau.

I should mention that Sanger had originally got his job on this *estancia* by concealing that he was married, with a family in England — it being a rule that all men on the place should be single and without children — and, though he was not asked to leave when we came to live with him, we always had to be on our very best behaviour, in case the Manager decided to enforce the rule.

But time is a great settler, and after a while, Sanger and Mita began to feel quite secure; as soon as the Manager married however, fear left their nights and stalked out into their days; especially when the new wife began having members of the staff to tea on Sunday afternoons — in order to get to know them better, she said. Significantly perhaps, we were not on her list.

When it was our turn to go, we were dressed in Sunday white, and marched over to *La Casa Grande* with instructions all the way on how to behave and what not to do, when we got there. By the time we arrived, Alan and I were shaking with nerves and practically tongue-tied; but after stiff preliminaries, we gradually thawed, Miss White being obviously very fond of children and enchanted with us in particular; and we piped up now and again with some pretty observation, much to our parents' ill-concealed relief — though they both kept an eye alerted to see we did not over-reach ourselves into impering caricature.

Tea was laid in the dining room, on the long mahogany table — a nostalgically English occasion, with the red wood shining, the silver a-glitter and a large cut-glass bowl of tea-spoons in the centre, artistically arranged: everyone said what a difference a woman's touch did make to be sure, and there were smiles and mild jokes to the scraping of chairs as we sat down.

I was a boy with very strong likes and dislikes; you will appreciate my joy, therefore, when right in front of me, I saw the dish piled high with home-made scones — my current passion.

Mita had seen to it, and Sanger had made sure, that our table-manners were unmistakably mid-Victorian, so there was no fear of my disgracing them by *asking* for anything; but all through my preliminary two pieces of bread-and-butter, I kept my eyes on that dish, willing, but *willing* someone to offer me at least one scone. At last, after, « Have you had your two pieces, Bobby? » « Yes, Mita! » « Would you like another piece? » « No thank you, Mita. » « One of these little Rock Buns? » « A biscuit? » « A tart? » « Ah, I know what you are waiting for — one of those delicious-looking scones! » I was allowed to help myself, and without undue hesitation, managed to fumble the largest on to my plate. Imagine my chagrin when I sunk my teeth into that tasteless, dry, floury, choking imposition called scone! Manfully I plodded through it, washing each rasping mouthful down with a swig of tea; until at last I had cleared my plate, and much to the surprise of Sanger and Mita, declared myself « Full Up. »

I was still eyeing the dish in front of me, filled with bitterness and un-Christian thoughts, when the Manager's new wife said, « I think I'd like to try a scone, please. » Since I counted this attractive lady as a new friend, I quickly cut across with, « I shouldn't have of those, if I were you. They're awfully stale. »

Suddenly there was a scuffle, and before I could let out more than one agonised shriek, I found myself alone outside in the passage, with Sanger's handiwork making my ears tingle. Feeling like a leper and weeping quietly, I crept back to the drawingroom, and hiding behind the grand-piano, waited fearfully for the grown-ups to finish tea.

When eventually they returned one by one, and still I was ignored, I was overcome by a profundity of shame no adult is capable of experiencing. Then Mita called me to her side, and I had to cross the whole room with everyone staring. « Let me die! Let me die! » I thought with such intensity I almost cried it aloud.

Mita said, « Now I want you to go and tell Mrs. Maclean how sorry you are. » These words confused me out of the little sense I still had, and I looked round in obvious bewilderment (which brought a snigger from someone under a potted palm), until at last I remembered about Miss White now being Mrs.

Maclean. Somehow I again got myself across that huge expanse of pink carpet, and said, « I'm sorry, Miss White, I told you about the scones being stale. » And Miss White smiled and answered, « You only meant to be helpful, sonny — didn't you? » I mumbled an affirmative; but I could see a gleam in her eyes which made me realise she was my friend no longer; I had further proof of this later, when I asked her if she would play some of that pretty music on the piano, and she said, « No — not now! » with another gleam which told me, too, that she knew I was trying to make amends, knowing she liked playing the piano — though she always said she didn't.

Well, the first thing that happened next morning, or the first thing I was conscious of, was a crash as Sally landed on my skull. Before I had time to protest, she had whisked the bedclothes to the bottom of the bed, and let out a shriek which nearly stalled my circulatory system, and would have done the same for that of the neighbours, if they hadn't all been out at work like good citizens of the Welfare State.

« For God's sake cover yourself, man, and don't lie there like that, shameless as a coot — though you *are* shameless as a coot, and I've always known it. What have you done with those nice pyjamas you got for your birthday, last birthday? And another thing, Henry Miller says all Englishmen wear pyjamas all the time, and a fine old sneer he makes out of it; but I took him at his word — though why I should take his word for anything, search me, but I did. »

« All right, Sally — calm yourself! I can't help it, can I, if you suffer from misapprehensions? Though he wasn't as young as you think, as I always like to have a bit of Union Jack next to my skin in winter in England. But last night I got home late, and couldn't find those pyjamas of mine, the ones with the broad stripes all over, like Paul Muni wore in *A Fugitive from a Chain Gang*; so I just crawled in without them; now I wish I hadn't, for I feel a sore throat coming on, which explains it (unless I caught cold in the Fitzroy last night), or maybe both. Anyway, I feel like dead mutton this morning — so leave me alone. And who let you out, by-the-way? »

« You did! Or rather you did a great, maudlin Papa's Home at Last act last night, which I suppose you've forgotten to remember; and you forgot to turn the catch on my cage when you staggered off to leave me in peace, after singing the whole of *Father, Dear Father, Come Home with me Now!* Yes, every dreary verse of it. But I've brought you a nice cup of tea to warm up the works, and would have done more, only the food safe's locked, and I couldn't get at it. So drink up, dear boy — and let's get on with this writing you're doing. »

Well, I sat up and drank up, and after a cigarette or two, I began to feel less like the naked and the dead with my old sweater on; but suddenly I was sure I detected a ringing in the ears, and I said, « I shall get mastoids if I go rushing about in the cold with this cold on me — so thanks for the tea, *and* the company. I think I'll doze off for a while, and try to shake it off. »

« Oh no you won't! You asked me to keep you writing, and I didn't leave my bed just for the pleasure of watching you turn over and die. So up you get, Robert, and no more excuses, for I've never seen you take a night out with less damage — even if you do need a shave. Robert, I'll give you such a birthmark someplace to remember me by, if you don't unglue your eyes. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, lying there like a hog, you lazy good-for-nothing. You call yourself a man, I suppose? That's funny, your calling yourself a man, I must say... »

« I don't call myself anything, Sally, and I just want to pass over in peace, if you'll be kind enough to go out quietly, shutting the door after you. »

But I could see it was no use; Sally being up and lively and I being down and deadly, the odds were too unequal. « So let's compromise, old dear, » said I. « I'm not getting out of here with this influenza all over England, because if I felt like committing suicide, I know of more original ways of doing it. But I tell you what, just you turn your back for a second, and I'll nip out for the typewriter etc., and then we'll do the ruddy job right here — though you're going to sit on the bed-rail this time, my girl, for my shoulder's abandoned hope this morning, and I haven't forgiven you for all the sweet things you've just been calling me, Sally. »

Most of the trees round our house were native to the Argentine, but at the very edge of what we called the garden — though in reality, it was little more than an enclosure — grew an imported mulberry tree. From its branches, one could gaze out across the small paddock kingdom of a piebald stallion, left to the entrance gates of the *estancia* and the dusty road zig-zagging out into the mysterious world and an unfathomable future; right to where the lake in the *Uno Grande* lay tinting close to the horizon.

This sense of being on the very edge of things, of looking across an infinite distance was irresistible. Alan and I spent many hours playing and dreaming in the mulberry tree that it was never free from traces of us; our toys lay around its roots, our shoes and backsides polished its bark, our clothes had to be retrieved nearly every nightfall from its branches, and given first-aid. We loved the tree with the passion of lonely children.

Our affection was in no sense cupboard love, for the flavour of the fruit was something on the exotic side, insipid even to our way of thinking. Sometimes however, when we climbed into the grey fan of branches to catch at a breeze, when below the air was still and oppressive, we would pick little purple fruit, and savour it delicately, transformed in imagination into a couple of Eastern potentates (like the light and portly gentlemen on boxes of Turkish Delight), and then spit out the pips with an air of rakish abandon — over the side.

Sometimes our tree would become a great Spanish galleon, creaking realistically in a high wind, and an invisible board-party would have to be hacked back with wooden swords; sometimes we constructed a tree-dweller's platform across the clinging boughs, and mammoths and all manner of terrifying pre-maeval monsters would make the earth hazardous to tread. How many times have I scrambled up to safety, my heart nearly leaping out of my breast at imagined horrors! Sometimes we just lay along a branch, contemplatively chewing leaf.

One afternoon, when the heat seemed more than usually oppressive, and when such a profound silence had fallen between us, that the slightest movement of the growing tree was

beginning to magnify itself into the sway backwards and forwards of a real ship on a real ocean, a sudden shout from Alan made me turn my head with a click, and nearly lose balance. I looked at the distant sky. The clouds appeared unusually black and menacing; mass upon mass, they rose mountain-like above the plain, and I thought we were going to have a summer storm. Then, close to the rim of the horizon, a tiny orange spark opened like an eye, and closed again.

« It's a fire! It's a fire! » Alan started to chant. « I believe it's on our place! It's coming this way — burning everything to the ground! »

I forget how long we watched, waiting for something further, some sign; but minute after minute passed, nothing happened, and we grew heavy-eyed from staring. Though nothing was changed, the air had, I fancied, a slight tang, a scent that made it more oppressive than ever — and yet, somehow more exciting.

Then, galloping down the road, came a horseman. I caught a glimpse of him between the trees, tensed forward in his saddle, legs beating against the sides of his pony, chin out, reins at shoulder level. In a flash he was gone, and in a flash, we were on our feet.

With a triumphant, « Come on! » Alan slid to the ground; I followed, and we raced all the way to the house. But we did not arrive before the rider: we found him gesticulating to an excited audience, and stayed until someone suggested driving over to examine or extinguish the fire; then we were off at the run again, straight for the garage. We heard Sanger shout a word to Mita, and then the pounding of his boots as he caught up and passed us. Sanger *running*!

The Chevrolet was assaulted from three sides almost simultaneously. For a moment it seemed she might refuse to start: then a sputter and throb confounded our fears. Sanger turned with a triumphant grin, and seemed to become aware of us for the first time, hesitated breath-takingly as though he contemplated leaving us behind, muttered something inaudible, but allowed us to remain in the back seat.

With Sanger's foot jammed hard against the floorboards, accelerator dug like a spur into the guts of the engine, how we swallowed up the silver tape of the road! What prodigious

clouds of dust; what swerves round corners! What a screeching of brakes and blaring of horn, as one of Miss White's prize Guinea fowls committed suicide against the radiator.

« B****r! » said Sanger. « That's torn it! » But he didn't stop.

The road was so rutted and there were so many bumps, believe we travelled the greater part of the time in mid-air. Once, Alan hit the roof, and developed a swelling and a sniff route. I remember his look of indignation when I refused to sympathise with a casual, « For goodness sake wait until we get home! »

What speed! What unbelievable luck to be racing, to be racing at full-throttle towards a real fire! The dream of all small boys come true. We only needed a clanging bell to complete our happiness.

But what a sad anti-climax when we got to our destination. The fire had most inconveniently, most unoblingly, most unromantically — gone out. All that remained was a few hundred yards of charred and smouldering waste land — and no chance at all of a further conflagration.

And, as Sanger lifted the mangled mess that had once been a prize Guinea fowl off the radiator, I think he too, regretted the absence of danger, the only excuse for careless living, for I heard him again mutter under his breath the usual word that began with a b.

My Auntie Ida. Now Sally, there's an old old saying I forget exactly, but the gist of it is that big things have small beginnings, or words that mean just that; and certainly (as you will find out if you stop fidgetting, and listen carefully) the big event of my childhood — indeed the catastrophe that was the *finis* to my childhood — had its beginnings in the fact that my Auntie Ida had a wart on the side of her nose. It was a small one, and Alan and I found it quite attractive, for we liked something to look at when listening to bedtime stories — but that wart was as dangerous as a time-bomb, though at first, no one then realised this. When she was not reading, Auntie Ida was always falling in love, or as Sanger scornfully said, « Making a damn fool of herself: drooling like a

sick heifer over some nincompoop of a man.» Sanger you see, was not the type to suffer Romeos under his window, and though I'm sure he wouldn't have pined or declined if Auntie had gone off somewhere to get herself a man, he was quite determined not to have any amorous swains knocking at *his* door: one man was, in his opinion, quite enough for any household. So Auntie Ida never made much progress, and this was why: Sanger wouldn't say or do anything hostile for a long time; on the contrary, he would be all honey and stardust, and tell everyone in confidence how glad he was that poor old Ida had at last found a nice steady young chap to take an interest in her — though he never refrained from adding that probably it wouldn't come to anything much (« These things often don't, don't you know! ») until finally the engagement would be announced amid rather hysterical rejoicings. He would be the first to congratulate the bride-to-be; but he always found it convenient to stare at the wart on her nose, and murmur under his breath (to be heard, but not to be heard) a few words suggesting that he hadn't expected old so-and-so to sign on for life. Staring for a moment longer, he would shift his gaze as though in embarrassment, and go on to congratulate her all over again, in a tone which clearly expressed his wonder that there could be a man alive considerate enough to overlook such an appalling deformity. Now my Auntie Ida had an Achilles' heel in that wart, and she was proud as a beauty from New Orleans; so she usually broke off the engagement then and there; or if not then, at the latest a week later, having extorted from her man the confession that he loved her for herself alone and not for her looks.

Auntie Ida had been engaged four times since she had come to the Argentine, and my whole history might have been altered, if only she had been allowed to take a dip at least, into matrimony. But hope only dies when it is fenced round by limitations; and really there were no limits to our bachelor society. Undismayed therefore, Auntie Ida started all over again with a certain Mr. Hollands.

Mr. Hollands was about thirty, and enormously fat. He had a bald head (which he kept hidden summer and winter, indoors and out, under a beret), a stammer, and a tendency to fall asleep in deck chairs when he should have been wooing

my Auntie Ida. In spite of these shortcomings, the well-upholstered lover made good progress — don't ask me how we knew: all I know is that we did — and soon we began to look forward to yet another celebration with doubtless, yet another dramatic conclusion.

But Christmas came first. At its approach we lost interest in romance; Auntie Ida and Mr. Hollands, once the topic of many speculations and essays in spying, were brushed aside for what we considered really important matters. The toy-room shelves had to be tidied: space must be found for all those new acquisitions we dreamed of and longed for with marvellous intensity.

Day by day, as December advanced, the weather became hotter and more sultry than almost could be borne; but Alan and I managed to find energy enough to undertake our annual clearance. Laden with cast-offs, we wore a path to the rubbish-heap; the heavy scent of the Tamerisk hedge drugged us as we passed from the shade of the veranda out into the cruel sun-glare of the sun; the sky flickered whitely; distance trembled, and the hours stretched on and on and on, away to an impossibly remote morning when we would wake and find that it was really Christmas.

And every day, Auntie Ida sat in the shade, knitting secret knitting, sewing secret sewing and tying secret parcels; and as she sat, she smiled secretly, as though she were thinking: « This time next year, I'll have a husband of my own to make presents for! »

That Christmas Auntie Ida gave me a present that was home made. It was an elaborate and stoutly constructed theatre, complete with scenery, characters and a playbook entitled: *El Marcader de Venecia* by Guillermo Shakespeare. It called for candles, torches, gramophone and records, and began to give my first play without thought of rehearsal.

The performance took place on the white-scrubbed table in the peon's kitchen, for the benefit of the foreman, his wife, his little daughter and a young man who squatted on a cow's stool in the flickering shadows of a far corner.

I stumbled somehow through the text. Many of the words

and phrases were incomprehensible — they bore no relation at all to Spanish as I knew it — and I had to stop frequently to ask whether the plot was being followed. There was always a goodnatured chorus of, « *Sì! Sì! — adelante!* » though I am sure none of us had more than the vaguest idea what the story was about. Once, glancing over the top of the proscenium, I caught sight of a semi-circle of eyes staring, like flames of concentration, into the lighted rectangle of my stage, and I experienced that actor-sense of being in direct communication, that sudden upsurging of the heart which transforms the moment.

From then on, there was no peace for those about me — no peace at all. I insisted on producing a new play nearly every week.

Soon I became discontented with the cardboard figures, and replaced them with characters made from china-headed dolls — those rag-bodied ones with brilliantly glistening black hair, rosebud mouths, consumptive complexions and politely vacuous expressions. They had the great advantage of being conveniently ambiguous sexually, and could, by merely a change of costume, assume either a male or female rôle. Lengths of twine or knitting wool attached to neck and limbs converted them into attractive, if rather self-willed puppets. Thus, I became the manager of a troupe of actors whose unreliability no Covent Garden stars could rival.

I remember less about the plays these beings appeared in. They would mostly, I think, wobble on to the stage, leaning forward at an awkward angle, greet each other self-consciously in stilted phrases, pick a quarrel on an unlikely pretext, jerk through a perfunctory dance routine by way of reconciliation, and wobble off as the curtain fell.

I had not yet realised the possibilities of real drama, and since no one made it his business to instruct me, I continued for a long time, content only to present a Lilliputian spectacle where scenery and costume of utmost elaboration compensated for lack of dramatic content.

But this alas, could not go on for ever.

One day I realised that my audience had grown bored. It was a great shock and sorrow to me. So bitten was I by theatrical ambition that this discovery, instead of ending my

career as actor-manager, only discouraged me temporarily. From that hour, I became possessed with a grim determination to write somehow, and perform someday, a *real* drama — cost me what it might. As it turned out, the cost was high.

It was my undoing.

Sometime in March or April we were told that it would soon be my Auntie Ida's birthday. She was going to have a party, and we knew that at this party, she and Mr. Hollands were going to be engaged: Alan and I heard them whispering once behind the *galpón*, when they said they would surprise everyone by announcing it then.

Now Sally, if you believe in the devil — and I know you believe in the devil — you'll probably say it was the devil who put it into my head to give the party a surprise of my own. This was my surprise: I thought that, on my stage, I would put a play all about my Auntie Ida and Mr. Hollands being in love and getting engaged.

I dressed up one of my china-headed dolls in a scrap of green chiffon, and she became Auntie Ida; as for Mr. Hollands, I worried for a long time, for I didn't consider my dolls looked anything like him at all — as indeed, they didn't — until at last, I remembered that I had a doll without a head and a small wooden ball (which had belonged to Alan's kittle set) to take the place of the missing part. I painted features on the ball, made a beret out of velvet, and glued everything together. But my creation was far too slender, so I stole cotton-wool from the bathroom cabinet, tied some round the doll's waist to supply the necessary bulge, and well content, spent the next three days making a miniature pair of trousers and a little jacket. It was always a fiddly job dressing the men.

I did all this in secret.

The party was held on the veranda, for even with the worst of the summer over, it was still very hot. There was a massive cake with pink icing, but no candles (though Sanger with a gleam said there would *just* have been room for them), and everyone was very jolly. Mita told me Auntie Ida was engaged to Mr. Hollands, and that I must go over and tell

them I hoped they would be happy. This, I suppose I did.

What I remember most clearly about the party was how it ended; and it ended with my play in the sitting-room, when it was dark, with an audience of the Manager, the bachelors. Mita, Auntie Ida and, sitting on the best wicker-work chair, Miss White. Yes, they were all there, sitting and waiting for me to give them a surprise.

The first scene was well received. I made Auntie Ida come on to say how pleased she was to be in the Argentine after living in England, and having no luck there. The grown-ups thought it quite amusing to have Auntie Ida presented on my stage, and encouraged me with guffaws and giggles; but I think they were rather less pleased when Mr. Hollands made his entrance. I suppose they considered this too realistic; certainly, my doll did look very much like him, even if the cotton-wool stuck out under his coat, every time he bent forward. Now I had a fairly good memory for phrases, and I had listened to a few behind the *galpón* and in other secluded spots; and soon Mr. Hollands began to make passionate advances to Auntie Ida with almost Zolaesque realism.

There had been quite a few toasts drunk that afternoon, and maybe Mr. Hollands had drunk more than his share; anyway, I was hardly launched into my scene, when I heard a chair scrape, and before I could look up, I felt myself shaken into the middle of the room, and lambasted in the good old trauma-producing way.

There was a scream from one of the ladies and a shout from one of the men, and a loud and prolonged yell from me.

Sanger leapt forward, dragged me out of Mr. Holland's arms, and sent me spinning to the floor with a bang that rattled my teeth, and did more to reduce me to tears than all the other attentions I had been receiving.

« You leave my boy alone! » he snarled with a quick jab at Mr. Holland's jaw. The jab was returned, and Sanger, losing his temper, really began to try.

Mr. Hollands sat down on the floor opposite me, with a lot of blood pouring out of his face.

My Auntie Ida was screaming like a siren on a fire engine, as she tried to drag Sanger away from her lover, or alternative-

ly, to drag her lover away from Sanger. Everyone was making a noise, and holding on to someone else.

« Take that back! » Auntie Ida cried, throwing the new ring into Mr. Holland's lap. « You're a great drunken brute! To think of your beating an innocent little child! And I might have married you, and never found out till it was too late! » Then she staggered out of the room, with Mita in tow.

Suddenly there was silence.

At last, when the silence had settled nicely, Miss White (or rather Mrs. Maclean) got to her feet, and clearly and boldly said: « Archie, take me home at once! I have never witnessed such a disgusting scene in the whole of my life! »

Well Sally, that was the end of my play, the party, Auntie Ida's engagement — and Sanger's job.

Remembering the scones and the Guinea fowl, and the fact that married men were not supposed to work on that *estancia* anyway, Sanger was asked next morning, in an interview which lasted just fifteen minutes, to find himself a new job by the end of the month.

Sanger found a post without any difficulty. He was to be Manager of an *estancia* in the province of Buenos Aires, and we immediately began making plans for a brand new life. Children, like adults, both long for and fear change, but Alan and I were young enough then to do much more longing than fearing. The thing that delighted us most was the prospect of having a home to ourselves, and not having to share it with a host of adults. No longer would we have to be polite to more than two at a time, nor would it be necessary to take care whenever we played or where ever we played, not to get in people's way or make too much noise. Our era of creeping and whispering, we told ourselves delightedly, had come to an end.

Auntie Ida had gone back to England after breaking off her engagement; and Sanger and her ex-lover had become fast friends again — in fact I think they were faster and friendlier than ever before. The fight, you see, had released them both from uncomfortable situations: Mr. Holland's from a promise of marriage he obviously regretted; Sanger from a job, he had only been seeking energy enough to change.

Yes, they were friends again, and Mr. Hollands brought a large bottle of *caña* in a basket to our farewell luncheon party. « To lighten the jolly old road! » he explained; and everyone drank a lot of it — except Mita who didn't like the taste, and Alan and I who were given ginger ale instead. *Caña* I am told, is very powerful; indeed, I have heard it said that it is brewed specially for giants with stainless steel interiors, and the general impression I'm left with is that the legend has more than an element of truth in it. Certainly, when we climbed into the old Chevrolet and drove off, most of the goodbyes were waved from more or less horizontal positions, and Sanger was trying to sing *Auld Lang Syne* to the tune of *Drink to Me Only* as he steered in happy zig-zags out into the open road.

As soon as we had left the party well behind, Mita said, « Darling, I'd like to drive for a bit. Let's change over now — there won't be much traffic on this stretch. »

Sanger changed over after no more than five minutes' argument and three narrowly-missed telegraph poles.

« Well, » he said as he veered round the radiator, and climbed into the off side; « you'll have to press on it, old girl — we've got a train to catch, don't forget. »

« Yes, dear, » Mita replied.

Mita was a very careful driver, and a very slow one, and as we went on, Sanger dozing in the front seat, Alan and I counting the *teros* on the fence poles until we had counted ourselves into a stupor, the little hands on all the clocks of the world were remorselessly ticking round.

Suddenly Mita said, « Darling! Surely that can't be the train over there? »

But it was the train. So Sanger took over the wheel again, and began racing us towards the station.

The train was still a long way off, though with the ground flat and even to the horizon, we could see it quite clearly. Later on it got much closer, and everyone began saying we should miss it; everyone but Sanger, that is, who said, « No, we would *not* miss it. If it was the last thing he did, we would catch it in time. »

Alan and I leaned forward, urging the car on like a horse, and Mita kept crying, « Don't go so fast, dear — I'm

sure there is plenty of time, really. » But Sanger did not say another word: he just kept his foot pressed down on the accelerator and his eye on the road.

To get to the station, it was necessary to cross the line, and Sanger wanted to get well in front of the train, so that he could make the crossing with plenty of time to get to the station first, get the tickets out, and arrange for the car and luggage to be sent on.

« You boys be ready to spring out the moment we get there, » Mita ordered. « And be sure you don't leave anything behind in the car. »

Near the station, the road ran parallel with the railway track. We had the thrill of racing the train along this stretch, side by side. We were a little behind at first, but soon Sanger managed to squeeze a bit more speed out of the car, and we began to pass, first the last carriage, then the penultimate and then one after the other, until at last, we reached the engine. We all cheered mightily, and Alan and I turned to wave back at it.

But the level-crossing was just ahead. Sanger jammed his foot down harder: the car lunged forward. We swerved round the bend, and came down the hundred yard stretch towards the lines.

I think I heard Mita begin to say, « Don't! » — I could not be sure; the sound of the whistle and the roaring of the train were pounding in my head. We bumped across the first line, and I began to breathe freely; then all at once, a hot breath of air or steam scorched into the body of the car. I heard the whistle again — but this time it seemed to pierce right through me. The roaring stretched out pincer-like arms: and as I screamed, a black curtain came racing down over me.

When I next became aware of being alive, I was lying in bed in a strange room. There was a window facing me, with shutters over it: I could see the sky glinting through the cracks between the boards. When I moved to try to decipher the dim shapes glimmering strangely in the dusk, the bones of my skull grated in stabs of sudden pain. I raised my hands, and felt bandages covering my hair and forehead.

I was just going to let out a wail, when a nun appeared beside the bed.

« Don't you move, *niño*, » she ordered; « or you may do yourself harm. »

With fine acceptance of the conventional, I said « Where am I? »

« You're in the Priest's house, » the nun answered. « And you will soon be well. Lie still — or the doctor will be angry. »

I didn't remember what had happened to me, so I lay still, thinking; soon I must have fallen asleep again, for when I next opened my eyes, it was night. There was a lighted candle by my bed, and the nun was nodding over her beads.

« I want my mother, » I said.

The nun shivered and shook herself as she woke up. She told me to go to sleep. « I want my mother! » I insisted.

« You must wait until the morning, » was the answer. « But you must sleep now, as you have had an accident. »

I thought this over for some time. Under my bandage, the scar you see running into my hair on the left, was forming, and my head burned and throbbed. Thinking seemed to make it worse, but I could not help puzzling about being in an accident, and gradually I remembered leaving for our new home, the racing of the car — and then the train.

Maybe even the thought of that train was enough to knock me out. Anyway, when I next took notice, I found it was day. The shutters at the foot of the bed were open, and there was a hard rectangle of blue sky in their place. The glare hurt my eyes.

I was just thinking about where I was, when the nun loomed up; this time she was with a little dark man with *pince-nez* spectacles and a twitch in his face.

The nun looked at me severely.

« Prepare yourself, » she said. « This is *Señor el Médico*. »

The doctor felt my pulse, and lifted the edge of my bandage.

« *Está bien*, » he said with satisfaction.

« I want to see my mother, » I said, sitting up.

The movement nearly creased me with pain; but I was determined not to lie down or die down before I had made them understand.

The nun and the doctor exchanged glances.

« *Tu estás solito, ahora niño,* » the doctor said gently.
« You are alone now. »

I did not cry, or protest in any way.

Such news was too far outside my experience to have any real meaning. I thought, « I am alone! » The word *solito* went echoing through my brain like a children's chant or a street cry. To me, sitting stiffly in that strange bed, it had as little meaning.

Only gradually, as I got well and began to move about the priest's house, I would think to myself, with a sudden lurch in my stomach, but also with a kind of thrill: « They are all dead — every one of them! And I shall never see them again. »

Mr. Maclean wrote to my Auntie Ida; my Auntie Ida wrote to Mr. Maclean and to all my aunts and uncles; and soon, one day soon, Mr. Maclean had a long talk with the priest in whose house I was still living, and the priest had a long talk with me. He said, « You are going to England to live with your relations in England — it is all arranged. »

I told him I didn't want to go and live anywhere. « No, I want to stay here, » I said; « and be a priest like you, and never go to England. »

The priest shook his head, and said: « You are a good boy, Roberto, and maybe some day, if it is His will, you will be a priest like me. Only, you must learn many things first, before you are a priest, and to learn them, you must go to school. In England. »

I started to howl. This time the tears came with no effort at all.

I think I guessed then, what I realise now, that my childhood had skidded to a premature end: and there was nothing I could do to make it go on, for I had to obey all the people who were making me do things I didn't want to do, like going away to strange countries.

All I wanted was to stay where I was, there in that house, and help the priest, and go to church and be holy.

But I went to England, instead.

Sally is sitting beside me, here in the Fitzroy; and she is drinking a Dry Martini and I am drinking neat whisky to celebrate the end of my childhood without caps. At the bar, there are two sailors talking about existentialism, and near the door, Nina is entertaining a boxer with tales of Paris in the twenties. There is a crowd tonight — such an elbow-squeezed-in crowd, that faces and figures are beginning to lose form, and soon will become merely part of an anonymous mass.

« What happened to you afterwards? » Sally asked. « I mean, I think you ought to go on — it's unfair to stop there. You went on as a child, after all. Your childhood only comes to an end, you know, when you're grown up — yes, quite grown-up. »

« My childhood stopped precisely where I stopped it, » I said. « And I'll trouble you not to interfere, old girl. »

« Yes, but... »

« Look, dear heart — don't argue. Just fade away, and finish your drink in the Ladies. I'm going to have the last word, Sally — I'm telling you now. »

« If that's the way you feel..., » said Sally shrugging. She sipped her Martini with an offended sip — but she didn't go.

« Anyway, » I went on. « I've a terrific idea coming for tomorrow — I have really. Sally listen! It's going to be a Still Life this time — but with figures *as well!* It'll be a masterpiece — if only I can persuade Robinson's to let me have a canvas on tick, and a few paints... »

« Hold it! » snapped Sally.

« What's wrong now? You bored? You've got no soul, dearie — that's your trouble. St. Francis was mistaken, old girl — you've got no soul. »

« Listen, sweetheart, » said Sally, tossing back the last of her drink with a deft flick of the wrist. « Listen, blockhead — tomorrow you'll be very busy indeed. Yes, and probably the day after, too! Tomorrow you'll be looking for a bloody publisher... »

EDWIN BROCK

WHETHER THERE ARE ANGELS

*Whether the angels are still there
and whether they still arrange themselves in rows
above the poplars but below the curves of ducks
something twenty years have left me doubting.*

*certainly the swans behave as though
something more than human errands them through
grey days above a glossy photograph of black water
and certainly the lovers still obey some call.*

*But now I see no farther than
a brood of yellow ducklings bobbing about
a brown-and-mother shape on the surface of a pool
There even the drakes stay launched and still.*

*Whether the angels still take children
by the hand and whip the woods to love for them
lifting stones aside as curtains on a strand of madness
now conjecture which once was faith.*

*certainly the birds make more than nests
in the more-than-acorn branches of each tree
and the sun lays light like stones on every leaf
and certainly the frogs see more than I can see*

*Who now may look no farther than
the hint of rain the hills are wearing
can hear no farther than the summer plea of pain
Which I exaggerate beyond what was intended.*

*O whether the angels are still there
Is something I may never know
Until my hand is touched again
And my twenty years are taken
As a token of my good intent.*

FAIRY TALE

*That night was soft and flowery.
There was a prince kept walking up and down the stairs
carrying crystal slippers in his hand. And the pauper-princess
she was there, enjoying what she could not understand.*

*And over and over the clock
has stopped one minute from the ending of the day; courtiers
perform their obsequies, small compliments are still exchanged,
and changeling horses paw the ground and neigh.*

*And everyone is unaware
of the future of reality; and this last waltz winds
on and on, as though the function of the memory provides
soft beds in which a king and queen may lie.*

*Outside the palace walls snow
falls; a peasant drives a buckled wedge into the iron ground
and cannot hear the music grinding on. Only something is
wrong
in this old and monstrous land: something very like today.*

UNLUCKY JIM

*My father was a man who laughed at charms
Walked under ladders and whistled at the wind
Who would not turn his silver at the moon's command
Nor cross his breast when freed from mortal sin*

*My father was a man among all men
Threw bullseye darts in grinning public bars
Who seven-nightly at the call of ten
Would hang his paper hat upon the stars*

*And daily I have seen my mother sit
With knives uncrossed beside a silver gnome
Polishing St. Christopher with salt and spit
To hold the wind that hauls the traveller home*

*But all the luck in all the lonely world
And all the double-darts and wringing hands
Were far away the day my father died
Or saw him fall and would not understand.*

IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER

*This is said to please someone I never
consciously pleased, someone whom
I carry with me here or there, or take
out from my pocket and examine carefully.*

*And when the sun shines, accurate
and clear, there is nothing I remember;
nothing which I could not draw as well
from a memory of other people, or swear*

*that this was so because it is enobling
or pure; but purity and nobleness are
nothing here, so that really I begin
within a sort of emptiness, and hope*

*that slowly I may probe it out. Despite this
you appear always to be telling me
some inappropriately tiny thing: a way
to handle knives and forks or comb my hair.*

*I presume we cannot always have been eating
or preening half-forgotten heads in bedrooms.
In fact I do recall that once we walked
together past a well-known grammar school*

*and you insisted on and on that I make this
a kind of goal; although you never knew,
it was a goal I scored — though nobody worried
about it very much, least of all me.*

*And that, I suppose, is our main difficulty:
that the image that I make you have of me
is one that you would never have enjoyed;
and yet continually I wish that you were here,*

*if only that we talked on knives and forks:
it is a sort of emptiness I bear; it is
a kind of charm which never works and which,
in dragging from my pocket, I may tear.*

AN ATTEMPT AT EXORCISM

*Now it is your yellow dress and young
Sun-coloured legs that I remember
And the Old Bridge in Dulwich Park
And the ducks being noisy about summer*

*And this, though false, is something which persists
Like the jammed note of a car-horn in
A long and lonely street and the one and only
Memory of drowning, which also is untrue.*

*And now I can no longer shuffle you
From memory, but turn up Jokers in my hand
Along with Kings and Queens. Of course
There may have been no yellow dress*

*And the Old Bridge, which is now made
Of stone, is also suspect. Perhaps
Only ducks, then, and their noisy summers
Still exist; that and your yellow-coloured legs.*

THE CURTAIN POEM

*A home should have a wife, a cat
and blinds upon the window that
when pulled aside are suddenly drawn back
again. A wife should have a cat to kick,*

*a home to love and, if I have not made
my meaning plain, a curtain to be drawn
aside and suddenly pulled back again*

*A man should have a wife to love
a home to kick and cats upon the curtains which
he may from time to time refrain
from seizing to and back again*

*But if a home should have a man
who waits upon a window-sill
endeavouring to find a plan
for all that moves outside the pane*

*be sure the home will have a wife
perhaps the wife will have a cat
but if by now my meaning is not plain*

*the wife in all sincerity should
turn her back upon the scream
and, singing, seize the cloth across again.*

ROBERT GITTINGS

A BREATH OF AIR

To Christopher Fry at Trebinshwn
near Llangorse Lake

*Through shutter-chinks and casements from earliest morning
light,
Rolling in edgeways came the sun's coined fire,
Or probing with its filaments alive and tremble-white,
Day pierced the waking eyeball with glowing wire.*

*Like lemon-groves of Palermo, the lime-tree's scent
Curtained across the lawn, choking almost to tears,
While through its chequered honeycomb in and out the bees
went,
A contained humming, a river with many weirs.*

*All day and for forty days, bland or glaring,
The sun had shone: no breeze in that inland place,
To mitigate, with airs from tide-turn, the flaring
And smoulder of the noon, the baked carapace,*

*The livid shell of metalled hours. Even the lake
Was an aluminium sheet, and our boat's prow
A tinfoil-cutting knife, and the closing wake
Clashed like Arthur's armour under the mountain brow.*

Fistfuls of butterflies, flung on the air like doves,
 Snowflaked the garden, bewildered and dazed with heat.
 All was opposition; cool water lukewarm; and love's
 Charm a disillusion, pilgrim with dust-sore feet.

Only at dusk when, blobs of brown, the owls came
 Squatting on the telegraph with hoarse high call
 Was there a faint relief, a withdrawing. The last flame
 Retreated with slow step, a hint of dewfall.

Snobs light, though heart still heavy, at that time I went
 Past the rubbish-bonfire, its straight-fingered smoke,
 Up the rough pasture, brown with tussock and dry bent,
 To evening's vantage outlook, on a rounded hillock.

All, released from day, was clamorous. Rook and sheep
 Called together harshly, and the cow's loud moo
 Tinged with midges and the bat's cry, a stone-chip
 Flaked out of greyness as he glanced to and fro.

Below, in shadow, the lake, a long-head snake,
 Showed in woolly trail of mist its low close form.
 Still nothing moved on earth: a dead country: awake
 Only to sleep again or mutter with thunderstorm,

Valley and heart weighed down, watchful yet not hopeful,
 Waiting for a sign, still dreading what sign might come,
 No voice to utter revelation, one clear rule,
 For the impossible commandment, pulsing like a drum.

All at once, firefly through the winding valley, a car
 Hung its yellow eyelamp from hedge to green hedge,
 Approached, drew level, spun past, unaware
 Of the stranded watcher standing on night's dark ledge.

Eden again: then, sudden as to Moses
 A fire-blossom in wilderness, an ochreous pyramid
 Rose from the forgotten bonfire; flames tongued like roses
 Erupted and spiked and shattered open all that lay hid.

*I saw the apples pink though not with autumn: saw
The underside emerald of leaf and spray:
Saw and felt danger. Instinct, with no law,
Feared the strange eruption, the volcanic latter-day,*

*So ran, leaping the hummocks, down the hill; and arrived
Like the spectator of some aerial disaster
Useless in negation. For the flame, revived
By the swift passing motion that had been its master,*

*Lay quiet again. The casual gust, meeting my downward flight,
Had passed up the slope, dwindled to expire.
Only a raft of leaves, dull beneath my sight,
Was corded with colourless ropes, the residue of fire.*

*And there it was in the whitened ferns of ember that I knew
My heart at last, held in that casket of drab heat;
Image and actual the artist-moment drew
A picture of reality, soul-self-portrait complete —*

*One who was nothing of himself, one who waited
On the climate of each day to bring what he was,
One who, in the slack tide of doubt, often debated,
Never decided; one who in the face*

*Of choice still made none, but let the midget moves
Of many-handed chance appear to be his own;
One who contrived life; did not command his loves,
His beliefs, even his daily labour. One*

*Who stood, pretending action, for a breath of air
To blow upon the heart; and only thereafter
As it blew, broke into flame or tears, despair
Or joy; even the jointure of grief or laughter*

*Not his, but from outside, beyond; and, the breath gone,
Relapsed again into the passive and vegetable coal.
So looking down I saw, inward far and alone,
Into the long mirage, the haze-shimmer of the soul.*

Yet there on that horizon, sphinx at the desert end,
 at Death: and Death itself was the last decision
 Only the soul alone could take: no lover, friend,
 Event could stand by me or soften that vision.

But if willy-nilly at death, why not now? Why could not
 divine some trackway through the torrid dust,
 Even as now, on impulse, my body had got
 The air of its own flight, meeting the random gust?

Take my own movement, impress upon the heart
 some trial of self: to say, that I will do,
 That I will not do: to be a word apart
 From the closed book of life, its pages gummed-to —

Bound by the mortality which mocks all intent,
 strive not to be mocked, clear a space, prepare,
 However small or lonely, for the truth we circumvent,
 The final just assessment of the judging year.

So in that thought, the drought that held me broke.
 Streams ran in the senses long buried underground.
 Music and water flickered across the landscape, shook
 The dry season out of time, and my soul unbound.

All calm under stars now. Lamplight struck the tree
 Golden from the window, its murmur still populous.
 Heavy the dew for another heat-dawn; but cool now and free,
 Went at last with certain step into the waiting house.

C. H. SISSON

FELLFOOT

*They live in a solid cottage by the stream
And I know this of what is in their skins
It grows to hope but does not seed to dreams
They are the sort of country they live in.*

*Their limbs lie on these boards, heavy with sap
The eyes they close are grey and green as stone
They are not happier than trees perhaps
When they are sad, then like the wind they moan.*

*The pot upon the hearth cooks simmering food
Logs will not burn to ash in a whole day
Their cankers are kept numb by a slow blood
Slowly they twist, and turn from brown to grey.*

EPITAPH

*These two in life did not discourage death
But oh! it was like amber in their hearts
Growing, at last it left no room for breath
And they are hard and clear in all their parts.*

THE ATTIC

*Why should two animals inhabit there?
— He, small and dark, made like the root of a tree
She with the round flesh of considering kine —
Why should they crouch above that gaslit stair?*

*Is it because a city is a forest
Which to escape is to be less than beast?
And to be open is to be encagèd
Where there is neither sacrifice nor priest?*

*Out of a farm-house built upon a Roman's
Hearth, girdled with leaf and Druid stone
He could not die but in a hidden city
Nor would she proudly have her death less fine.*

*So he will dance before Saul, and in his attic
Work all his glittering jewels to savage shapes
And therefore we must drink the cup he offers
Before his hand is wrenched aside by fame.*

IN LONDON

*I float between the banks of Maida Vale
Where half is dark and half is yellow light
In creeks and catches flecks of flesh look pale
And over all our grief depends the night.*

*I turn beside the shining black canal
And tree-tops close like lids upon my eyes
A milk-maid laughs beside a coffee-stall
I pray to heaven, favour my enterprise.*

*But whether there is answer to my prayer
When with my host at last I redescend
After delicious talk the squalid stair
I do not know the answer in the end.*

KAY CICELLIS

BEYOND CORINTH

An old man in a wheelchair, a young girl dressed in black: these two were the first to board the ship. The other first-class passengers, who climbed on deck just before the ship sailed, came upon them suddenly; an odd couple, sitting quite motionless near the railings. They must have been there for hours. They were looking out to sea — the docks, the rusty cargoes, the white liners — as if they were already travelling.

Their stillness was broken only when the girl rose and offered her deck-chair to a woman among the passengers: there were no other chairs and the woman was elderly. This gesture of politeness was executed coldly, like a mere act of justice. The girl did not even look at the woman; her eyes were kept lowered throughout her impersonal operation. The woman accepted the chair uneasily.

There were not many passengers in the first class. A few merchants, a few landowners and rich farmers; no tourists. They were mostly people going back somewhere, back home, back to some unchanging point of departure, after an interlude in the capital. This was not a pleasure trip. All the pleasure, if any, lay behind, in the receding harbour. The third class was slightly more crowded, because there were animals: a great many hens, bunched together like vegetables, and a dozen skinny cows. After only half an hour, the cows had soiled the lower deck so badly that people threading their

ay aft to the third-class lavatory lost their balance on the slippery boards.

The ship was not punctual in sailing. The captain did not care. The passengers were unimportant. His ship was on the *Barren Line*, which means that it was subsidized by the State to serve outlying islands, itineraries which could not possibly yield any profit. Once a fortnight — once a week in summer — the ship started on its long, slow, winding journey, stopping in many small ports, where the warmth of the islanders' welcome, the excitement caused by the ship's arrival — contrasting with the indifference of the busier islands — did not quite succeed in mellowing the Captain's sour disposition. Like most of the *Barren Line* captains, he felt frustrated. He missed the hustle and bustle of the worldlier ships, the quarrels, the incidents, the bribes for non-existent cabin-space, the singing and drinking in the third class, the dancing to the gramophone in the first class. He also missed the tourists, the foreigners. For this reason he had been especially nice to the old man and the girl in black; (it was he who had brought out the deck-chair for the girl) for though they spoke Greek, they looked like strangers; their faces were unfamiliar, and there was a vague shabby distinction about them.

He was curious about them; he thought of getting their names from the chief steward. But it would have to wait. Now he was busy steering the ship out of the harbour. The winter afternoon was coming to an end, hurriedly. The dirty sea took on a brief, steely glint, which was all the sunset could give it. Then the electric lights took over in the houses, shops and ships, all at once and so masterfully that one wasn't sure they hadn't been on all through the grey afternoon.

The harbour boomed and echoed for a while around the passengers on deck; then suddenly there was only the clapping of the waves against the flanks of the ship. They were out at sea, on their own. Some of the passengers, already bored, went down to the smoking-room. The old man and the girl remained; they were still motionless, their backs turned to the other people. The girl now stood beside the wheelchair, and hand on the old man's shoulder.

One of the few remaining passengers on deck, a currant-merchant, turned to his friend: « What about dinner? »

« We might as well wait till after the Corinth canal, » the friend said with a sigh.

« Of course... »

It took the ship about half an hour to crawl through the narrow canal. The rest of the passengers came back on deck for it. They had also thought: « One might as well wait till after the Canal. » But there was no real excitement. There were no tourists to click their cameras. Most of the people on board had been through the Canal a dozen times. But they had waited for it in order to pass the time; to postpone an early, unwanted dinner, to postpone going to bed in the stuffy cabins; and to split up time in smaller, more manageable doses.

« Why don't you come and stand here, you will get a better view of it, » said the currant-merchant to the girl in black, stepping away from the railings. The girl shook her head, and turned her face in the other direction. She seemed to be very shy, not to say prim.

Down in the dining-room, the old man remembered the incident with an effort: « What did that man say to you, » he asked the girl, « while we were going through the Canal? »

« He wanted me to take his place, so as to see better. »

« So that was what he said. I can't hear well, I can't see well. But you know what to do in such cases, you know how to look after yourself. Thank God, yes, you know what to do. »

She accepted his praise demurely. He picked up his fork and began to eat, quite greedily. But the girl stopped him, her hand on his sleeve. « Father, your medicine. »

He stopped eating, he closed his eyes. « No, no, » he sighed, « why should I? »

« It is here, » the girl said dubiously. But she was very calm.

« Why should I, why should I? » he repeated in despair. « Why should I be kept fit? Why should I be kept alive? »

She looked at him steadily, her fingers curled round the

cap of the small medicine bottle. She insisted a little with her eyes, then no more. Once again, she had performed an act of justice, a duty, that was all. Otherwise, one might have said she agreed with him; or rather she did not particularly want to encourage a different attitude in him.

« Was I talking too loud? » he asked anxiously, after a pause.

« No, it is all right. We are alone. You can talk as if you were alone. »

They ate on in silence.

The captain sat two tables away from them. The girl was right, he could not hear what they were saying. But he had noticed the tiny muffled scene over the medicine. He had not thought much about it; however it did remind him that he would like to get their names from the chief steward. He sent for him.

The captain was alone at his table. On the first few trips he had tried to organize 'the captain's table', as he had heard the captains on big liners did. But it hadn't worked. The passengers on this line didn't understand that sort of thing. They thought it meant that he was offering them a free meal. Also, they were very dull people, for the most part. The captain was not interested in the currant market. So tonight, as usual, he ate alone. He felt he could watch the couple better if he knew their names. Perhaps it would be a well-known name? an old, distinguished family from the islands...

The waiter came back, and whispered the name in the captain's ear. « And she's his daughter, » he added. « They come from Zante, but they haven't been there for years. The steward said the old gentleman's wife died a month ago. »

The captain had not heard of their name before. He was disappointed a bit. Now he noticed their shabbiness without their distinction, and also the fact that they were having a very frugal meal. They had ordered only one course, and not even a meat or fish course: a greasy pilaf, and then some fruit.

The waiter stooped again: « One of our cabin-boys is from Zante. Perhaps he has heard of them. »

The girl was beautiful, in a stale sort of way. She was pale and her skin was not very good, except for the forehead, which was extraordinarily pure. She wore no make-up; her

hair hung on her shoulders, quite long. Her figure, too, was rather bad; and her black dress, old-fashioned, did not help it; it was closed at the neck and the sleeves were long, like a schoolgirl's pinafore. But she had a wonderful profile; cold, too Grecian to be seductive, but wonderful all the same; and fine brown eyes with clashing brows, and small even teeth. It was not the kind of beauty that would ever 'blossom' forth; it would always be a little cramped, a little faded; and it would harden with the years.

Her father was more ordinary. He had a slight paunch, and he was going bald. He wore black-rimmed glasses. His mouth, rather thick-lipped, sagged, a sign of disgust and indulgence at the same time. His black tie was very thick and badly knotted. But she kept him scrupulously clean; that was obvious. He was by no means 'venerable'; the only trace of nobility was in his pallor — his invalid's pallor; and in his thin, tremulous hands, freckled with age.

He gave Antigone his hands to be helped back into his wheelchair. He could hobble about on crutches when necessary, but he spent most of his time in the wheelchair.

« Antigone, Antigone, I am already so tired; and it is only the first day. Were we right to go away? Was I right to accept your suggestion? But there was not much else we could do. I agree with you there. After your mother died, the rent-control people would soon have made us leave the house. It was much too big for two people, they kept saying. One wouldn't have thought that one person less could have made all that difference... Besides, it would have been too expensive; we couldn't afford to stay. My poor child, it is time I told you these things; because you must take over now. It galls me to have to tell you this. But you must take over. And you are so young! I should be able to support you, take care of you. But I can't. I am old; look at me, don't turn away your face: I am a useless invalid. Of course, I can still take care of you in some ways; I hope so; but not materially. For the past ten years, we have been living on the salary your mother got as a teacher; on that alone. You knew that? How could you not know, she repeated it often enough. You must

never say anything against your mother, Antigone; she was a fine woman, in spite of her faults. Believe me, she was heroic. A prosaic, unglamorous hero, which makes her even finer; a domestic hero. Alas, heroes often tend to become tyrants. That is how it is. I am not complaining. I never complained — you must understand this. I must never see in your eyes the dreadful suspicion I kept meeting in the faces of her relatives during the whole month that followed her death. I would not be able to bear that; I would not forgive it, as your father. I am still your father, in spite of what has happened. I am still your father. You are very young, and you need me. I think that is the only thing that keeps me alive. I am now a man with no rights; I am entitled to nothing; but at least I have a few duties left. Sometimes I forget, I give up, I think I ought to die. I will try not to be weak. I promise you I will try not to repeat that scene over my medicine. One tries to punish oneself, as best one can. Those hideous relatives of hers, they have undermined my spirit. You never liked her relatives much either, did you? From the first day of our marriage, they kept saying that nothing good could come of a marriage between first cousins. I can still prove them wrong; that is one of my duties. Through you, Antigone. You will prove them wrong. My Antigone. You are a beautiful child. But I must not tell you this too often. Don't ask why. Did you know that when you were small, I never noticed you much? I had too many worries, I suppose. Until the day of the accident, I had never paid real attention to you. Then, on that terrible morning, you stepped out of the shadows, as it were... You were there; and you have never ceased being there since that day. You led me to this ship. You have almost become a part of me; I say almost, because my guilt separates us. I have often thought: do I deserve you, after what I have done? I know there are many people who believe I do not deserve a daughter like you — so devoted, so obedient. Perhaps they are right. No, you must not try to comfort me. I am a miserable man. I must face what I have done. There is some truth in what her relatives say. I was not much good to your mother. From the day we married everything seemed go wrong. As a breadwinner I was a terrible failure. Bad luck dogged everything

I did. Then I got my first stroke... It made me very bitter — do you blame me? It should have killed me then and there; or at least the second stroke should have, on the morning of the accident. It would have been more merciful. But who am I to ask for mercy? I keep forgetting what I have done. I must not forget. You must remind me. I mean that; it is an order. I am still your father, after all. And yet, and yet — why didn't she ring that doorbell a little longer? I would have heard her in the end, I would have opened the door. I did not mean to lock her out all night. Why did she have to walk off in the rain like that? One would have thought she *wanted* to get killed. Perhaps she did. Perhaps I made her want to get killed. You see? You see? You won't dare say anything in my defence now. Antigone, what I did was terrible, never forget that.»

As they went up on deck, she had said to him once again: «No one can hear us. You can speak as if we were alone; as if you were alone.» (She did not count. She was just there.) So now there was this long monologue against the sea-wind, which sounded exactly like their silences. The passengers could not hear, but they watched and they whispered among themselves their incomplete information, snatched from captain and steward. «A widower — she died a month ago (a tragic death) he looks broken — no wonder — poor man (and she) so young — life is a sad business (life is) — poor man — girl —» The whispers died away on the wind. There was not much to say, really. Simple sorrow leads to a dead end, like perfect joy. The sorrow of death is the simplest of all. Simple sorrow is not sufficient. Antigone knew that well.

She waited to see whether his monologue would fluctuate once more between self-accusation and self-justification, shame and rebellion, the old pendulum swinging back and forth. But he was quiet now, waiting. So she gave him his echo; she said: «Yes, I suppose it was a terrible thing. What you did was a terrible thing.» He looked at her gratefully, wounded, his eyes swimming, letting her cool words sting him in a pure, delicious silence of acceptance.

Meanwhile Antigone thought: «It was not really terrible. I have lied to him again, as I used to do in the days before the accident. It must be my fate, always to lie to him.»

The first big lie had been a year ago, when she was eighteen and she decided to spend a whole night out with her lover. She had had to find a good excuse, plan things carefully. It had not been easy. Her father was very old-fashioned; he posed as a patriarchal parent, he believed in bringing her up strictly. He forbade her to wear make-up, to smoke, to go dancing. One day he had found her putting curlers in her hair, and had slapped her face, outraged. Her mother was not so vigilant: she was out most of the day, and in the evenings, exhausted by several strenuous hours of teaching, she didn't care. Antigone tried to keep clear of her father. She succeeded, because except on matters of discipline, he did not seem much aware of her existence. He spent all his hours in his wheelchair, brooding, reading the morning paper, reading old letters from business associates who had abandoned him long ago, looking over the household accounts. As he could have no part in the earning of the household money, he soothed his vanity by taking over the responsibility for the accounts; he did them meticulously. Money had always been the sore point between Antigone's parents. All their quarrels were caused by money. The proud man even depended on his wife for pocket-money. He had to ask her for it, nicely; she had to realise, with a fresh shock every time, that all his account-holding was but a shadow, and the reality lay in his wife's hand, in her worn black handbag.

For her mother Antigone had a kind of understanding, of tacit approval and ease, which was almost love. For her father she had nothing. For this reason she had no pangs in telling him lies, in deceiving him. She did it with beautiful cold-bloodedness. Hers was not an affectionate nature, anyway. But though she had no pangs, she was often puzzled, torn, made uneasy by the blatant contradiction between reality and appearance. She could not understand how they could exist side by side: her secret life, her secret thoughts, her real self, and the life she appeared to lead, the person her father believed her to be. It seemed to her amazing — wrong even — that the two aspects should not influence each other: that reality did not betray the nullity of appearance, that the falsity of appearance did not corrode reality. Sometimes she simply thought she was mad. Then once again she would

get used to seeing things double. She would obediently pay her due to appearance; she would tell lies; she would resume her place in the void that existed between her father and herself.

For the purpose of spending the night with her lover, she had made up quite a complicated story. A friend of hers — a girl from school — had had an operation, appendicitis to be precise. After a week in a hospital, the girl was to come back to her house. She wanted Antigone to keep her company during this first night of convalescence; she might need something, she might have a relapse. Normally the girl lived with her aunt; but her aunt, it seemed, was away in Salonica and would not be back till two days later. Antigone must go; she could not let her friend down.

But would Antigone — young, inexperienced — be able to look after a girl who had recently been operated, in an emergency? Antigone hardly seemed the right person for a case like this, her father objected.

Antigone said that another person — an older woman — had half-promised to come as well; but it was not certain. She must be there in case the other woman did not come. There was a doctor living next door; she would go to him in an emergency.

Her parents asked her what was the girl friend's telephone number.

Antigone reminded them that she had already told them, on several other occasions, that this girl had no telephone. (On several other occasions, Antigone had already used this girl as an alibi — mostly for innocent outings to the cinema — preferring her for the very reason that she did not possess a telephone.)

The discussion went on for some time, new lies flowering at every step with astonishing facility and profusion. Antigone's father had a great many objections, but he did not quite know how to phrase them: if she had asked to go on a pleasure trip, he would have found no difficulty; but she presented the matter under the stern light of the simplest, most obvious of duties. He had always posed as a humanitarian; he could not contradict himself now so openly. Antigone had indeed been clever in her choice of a story.

In the end he gave in, but insisted that her mother should accompany her to the girl's house, as it was after dark.

Her mother was tired, as usual, and impatient at all the fuss. She hustled Antigone into a taxi, and merely drove her up to the girl's door, without even waiting to see her ring the bell (the bell Antigone would not ring.) Before driving off, she pressed Antigone's hand: « Don't tell your father we took a taxi. You know how it hurts him to see my money spent carelessly, » she said with a small smile.

Antigone pressed her mother's hand back and went off to meet her lover with a warm, tingling feeling of comfort, as if she had shared with her mother not only the sad little conspiracy of the taxi but the more important one of her nocturnal appointment.

When she returned home next morning she dreaded the questions her father would ask; she was afraid she might give herself away. After all, this was her first big lie. Fortunately, he only asked whether her friend was feeling better; and Antigone requested his permission to go and lie down, because she had not got much sleep that night (which was true.) She lay on her bed, and brooded over the past twelve hours. She could not tell which was most unreal, the night she had spent with Agis, or the night her father thought she had spent with the sick girl. She could not believe she had really done this; what was more, she could not believe that no one knew about it, that it was possible for such an act to be so completely unknown.

But the next time she told an important lie, her fears were much milder, and they steadily decreased with every new lie. Soon, not only did she not evade her father's questions, but she provoked them. She would plague him with long bright accounts of imaginary outings, pursue him with descriptions of imaginary persons. It was as if she were trying to find out how far it could go, the unreality, the absurdity; how soon unreality would give in and prove it was unable to make up a life, a relationship, a family. There were times when she almost expected to wake up one morning and find that he was no longer her father, or that he had become a creature of the imagination, like the people she described to him when she came home after an evening with Agis.

On the ship, he was still the one who kept the accounts. He wrote down every penny they spent; after she had been to the bar to drink a lemonade or some soda-water, he would ask her to bring the notebook with the green marble pattern on the cardboard cover. The question: « how much did it cost? » even took priority over the disciplinary question: « You didn't speak to the currant-merchant, did you? » He also wrote down in the notebook estimates of what they would spend once they got to Zante. He worried considerably. « We don't even know how your mother's cousin will receive us, » he said. « And the peasants on the property have grown used to our absence after all these years. Will they be willing to give us our due now? »

He looked at her tenderly: « We are unwanted everywhere. »

But in the end he always found a way of comforting himself, while retaining the outward form of grief. « After all, nothing very much worse can happen to us now, » he would say. « Who will want to harm a broken old man and his child? We won't ask for much; we won't be in anybody's way. We will live so quietly, so humbly, they won't even notice us. We might even grow happy, just the two of us, without anybody noticing... »

He kept the accounts, but there was a difference now; he also kept the money. He carried the wad of banknotes reverently in his breast-pocket, the money which once he had not been allowed to touch. But this did not soothe his pride; it was too late, the harm had been done. He could never be properly proud any more. As for humility, it was just as problematic; a constant, unstable struggle, like a man who insists on wearing a shoe on the wrong foot. The fact that it hurt made him believe humility had been attained. He mistook discomfort for contrition.

The money in his breast-pocket, finally, only served to remind him of the humiliations he had endured when the money had lain in his wife's handbag. He went back to this poison again and again. « You will never understand how I felt, » he said to Antigone. « You are a woman — a girl — you will never know. People speak laughingly about the « woman wearing the pants » in the household. It is no laugh-

ing matter. It is tragic; it is monstrous, like a hunchback or an albino. It is unnatural. I have a horror of what is unnatural. Being the head of a family is as sacred, in its way, as being a priest. When I begged her for money, I was unnatural; when I demanded it, I was equally unnatural. No matter what I did, I could not be myself. I used all kinds of ruses and devices to get the money I needed from her. And she became extremely inventive in stopping me from having it. She became depraved by the power money gave her; I became depraved by need. One night, when I asked her for money to buy stamps for my correspondence, she said coldly: « Give me the letters, I will post them for you. » I said I needed some money for several other things as well, adding ironically that I hadn't had time to make a list of them for her. She yawned then, and said, all right, she would give me some money, but not now, she was tired; (her handbag was at her side, within easy reach). She would give it to me some time tomorrow... Surely you remember that night; it was the time I came to your room, unable to bear her presence any longer. A hideous, unforgettable night. At least, she taught me one thing, the value of money. We will have to be very careful with what we have left, Antigone. We will have to live very simply. You must keep this in mind, when you do your shopping in the village (don't ever send one of the peasants to do it for you), when you visit our tenants, when you talk finances with your mother's cousin in town. I will advise you, of course, as best I can. »

He looked at her wonderingly: « Isn't it extraordinary that I should depend on you, my child, so utterly... I, who was once... » He broke off, smiling, almost amused, almost contemptuous. In spite of his newborn love for Antigone, he still considered her insignificant, puny. She was a product of his; a pure and simple offspring. He could not realise that she now constituted a powerful, independant agency, that this agency had begun to operate on him; he did not know where she was to lead him. He was exclusively paternal. He would have been horrified if he had known that her feelings for him, on the contrary, were more fraternal than filial.

He had no way of knowing, naturally. Her manner was so deferential. Sometimes she touched his hand; she never

went as far as kissing him. The people on deck, the captain, the currant-merchant (he hadn't dared approach her again) stepped aside on her passage, awed by such devotion, such respect. Antigone acknowledged their homage with great poise, with a small dignified smile, at the most. She knew she was not what they believed her to be. But by now, the contradictions of appearances had ceased to puzzle her. Misunderstanding had become a definite, but unimportant, necessity; she had found it need no longer exclude reality.

Antigone had not forgotten the night her father had mentioned, the night he came to her room after an extremely violent quarrel with her mother. She had not forgotten because it had been the first time he had roused some interest in her. After that, there had been a relapse into indifference, alienation; still, she remembered how close they had come to an actual contact.

She had just come home (after a late tutorial, as she had told her parents). She knew nothing about the quarrel; it was all over by then, muffled and crushed behind the door of the parental bedroom. Then he had come staggering out in his pyjamas, and hobbled on his crutches to the threshold of her room. He paused there, closed his naked eyes (his spectacles were off, she had not often seen him like this) and whispered: « Let me stay in your room for a while. »

She too was in a state in which he had not often seen her: half-undressed and barefoot. He believed she must be modest in front of all men, including her father. Her calico petticoat was creased, soiled; one strap was torn and had been clumsily fixed with a safety-pin before she left Agis. She hastened to put on her dressing-gown. But he did not seem to notice all this; probably because of his missing spectacles. However, this mutual exposition, denudation (for the first time she noticed he had quite a few gray hairs on his chest and his feet were very white) created a kind of intimacy between them — accompanied by the uneasiness of intimacy.

She helped him into an armchair, the only one in her room. He thanked her, and half-ashamed, said: « I had to come, or I think I would have gone mad. I couldn't lie down

on that bed, next to her, and go to sleep, after what happened.» They still shared a large double bed, an old-fashioned conjugal fortress.

Antigone sat by his side, silent, her hand on his knee, in the position that was later to become so familiar to them.

« She is lying on the bed, sobbing. A mild touch of hysteria, I should say. » But it was clear he was frightened. « Antigone, I hit her. »

Antigone woke up; she began asking him questions. Her dull, opaque face became animated.

« I asked her for some money. Her bag was at her side, within easy reach. She said, not now, I am too tired; some time tomorrow. Then I saw red. The bag was at her side... » He told her the whole story. There was shame, there was fear in his face; there were all the symptoms of guilt; Antigone recognised them with a sense of wonderment and revelation. She was very close to him now.

He went on, in a low voice: « I shouldn't have hit her. It was an ugly thing to do. I don't think I've ever done it before. But then she had never humiliated me like that before. »

« Tell me how you hit her, » said Antigone.

But Antigone was to be disappointed. Gradually her eagerness fell, for under her passionate scrutiny, her pressing questions, he soon confessed that he had not hit her very hard, he had merely pushed her so that she fell across the bed. Besides, after the first moment of shock, he was gradually regaining control, and discovered excuses for what he had done. « She drove me mad. She made me lose my head. I cannot describe to you the insolence on her face when she said: « tomorrow, you'll just have to wait till tomorrow. » It was more than any man could bear. I have been putting up with these humiliations for so long, Antigone. »

This was not true guilt, and Antigone knew it. What was more, perhaps he was right; perhaps there was no reason for guilt; not enough reasons. Her face became patient, weary; she lost interest; she was once more the respectful daughter.

All the same he was a broken man. He lay his old hands on the arms of the chair, he lay his head back.

« If only I could stay here, » he murmured. « How am I

to go back to that room, how is the long night to pass? » He opened his eyes, that were full of anguish. « Antigone, how am I to spend the rest of my life with her? Face to face, day after day. We cannot separate, or divorce. At our age... And she is a good wife, I know it. But how am I to live with her? And when you go away — when you marry — what will my life be in this house? »

Perhaps for him too this night was the first time he really became aware of her, and what it would be like to lose her.

He was on the verge of tears; completely distraught, he begged Antigone: « Let me stay here, let me stay here a little longer. Just a little longer. God, who would have thought it would come to this? »

There was no guilt, but there was grief. Grief remained and it was heavy and difficult to bear. Yet for Antigone it was not sufficient.

She kept him in her room for another hour; she looked after him, made him a cup of camomile tea, wrapped a blanket round his white feet. She was a nurse, a nurse only, and he the stranger who had nearly become a brother. For some people charity can never be complete love.

In her bed that night, after he had gone, a great bitter cry rolled over and over in her, like a wave that cannot break. « Shall I tell you what guilt is like? Shall I tell you what guilt is like? »

She had not known guilt immediately, from the start. Only towards the end, when the circle of deceit grew wider and wider. For she had not deceived her father alone. The lie had been stretched to breaking-point, an arrow tested on many bows.

Antigone had met her lover, Agis, at the chemist's. She visited the chemist's often to get medicine and fresh camomile tea for her father. On most of these visits, Agis had been there too. He obviously came to buy medicine, like her, but he behaved as if the shop belonged to him; he seemed to spend a lot of time in it. She usually found him either weighing himself, like a child, with excitement and concentration, or talking to the chemist, who was perhaps an old friend of

his. One morning, when the chemist had gone into his laboratory at the back of the shop to prepare her prescription, Agis spoke to her. Their conversation was dignified and dull. They spoke about illness mainly. They uttered platitudes: « Health is the greatest blessing man can pray for, » and « Science has made the most amazing progress in the last few years. »

« There is almost no disease that Medicine cannot cure today, » she confided to him. « Except my father's... I don't believe he will ever get better. »

« You never know, » he said cheerfully, « they might discover something new, any day now. » He was, of course, quite indifferent and unconcerned about her father, she knew it at once for having used that cheerful tone of voice so often herself in her father's presence.

She liked him. He was not very good-looking, his body was thin, almost undeveloped; perhaps he was even a bit shorter than she was. His skin was white, papery, like someone who has lived all his life in a great town of the north. But there was this brightness, this cheerfulness about him.

When he wore his coat (it was the beginning of winter) he looked quite normal, a slight man, but normal. But when he took off his jacket in order to weigh himself, Antigone could see his shoulderblades sticking out, and the chicken-like thinness of his neck, which had to support a rather large head. She was suddenly taken by a passionate curiosity to see the rest of his body, to see how the signs of manhood would manage to make themselves felt on this infantile body. She had not felt curious about a man's body before — not even, at the age of puberty, about her father's body, so well hidden in the draperies of paternity. Perhaps it was the stillness in the chemist's shop, the ritual of taking off his jacket, which was a beginning of undressing, the stale but delicate smell of sweat coming from his creased shirt. Nor did she feel any repulsion. She came from a dark and stuffy household herself, where illness was considered a necessary evil and fresh air dangerous; a household where fruit was always stewed, a cold shower unheard-of, and a wollen cardigan considered advisable even in the summer months. She had been to an old-fashioned girls' school where athletics were not encouraged,

and gym shorts positively forbidden. She had been to the seaside twice in her whole life, and could not swim or ride a bicycle. Her body was heavy, especially at the base, yet no burden to her; she was so unaware of it. She had never felt any attraction for the young, lithe boys who went about the streets in skin-tight jeans, with hard brown chests showing through their unbuttoned shirts, and an elastic spring in their step. They seemed rather ridiculous to her, not quite a part of the real world. Agis, though much older than she, was not only real, but natural.

« Is this medicine for you? » she asked him, when the chemist handed him a small box of pills and two bottles.

« Yes. The doctor says I need some tonics. You can look at them, » he said. They stooped over the medicine in silence, like two people sharing a hobby. « I might have to start injections, » he concluded with some satisfaction.

It soon became a habit for him to walk with her some of the way when she went home. Not up to her door, because her father might be at the window and he would make a scene. When she explained this to him, he understood at once and did not insist. He even seemed to find it natural.

But when their relationship became more demanding, there was no gradual development for them to follow. As she had no social life, there were no parties, no gatherings at which she could meet him; she had no « gang » of friends which he could join. So from the very start their meetings were furtive, clandestine; nor could there be any pretence that they were meeting for the simple pleasures of friendship. The secrecy, the lies inevitably suggested a more serious motive. In the complete isolation in which she lived, unaware of the life of her generation, in that void where there were no grounds for comparison, in this strict tête-a-tête, there was no other role he could assume but that of a lover. So from the casual conversation at the chemist's and the brief walks back home, they leapt without any intermediary stages to the small basement room which he had rented for the purpose of lovemaking.

When he told her he was married, she was not deterred. It seemed a happy coincidence to her that there should be deception on both sides, rather like the coincidence that they

should both be involved with illness. It brought them together. Having lived under oppression all her life, deception was in the nature of things. The fact that he could never marry her, that she would be « wasting her time » with him, did not preoccupy her, for she was no husband-chaser, again as a result of living outside society. She had none of the ambitions of other girls her age, who were governed by different, more competitive laws.

A large part of the time Antigone and Agis spent together was devoted to thinking out the lies they would have to tell after they separated — he to his wife, she to her father. However, it was not long before the lies intended for Agis' wife took up the larger part of their time. Antigone would decide upon the story she would tell her father in five minutes, firmly, without hesitation. One might almost say that she grew careless; her stories were often improbable, or incomplete. It was as if until now she had been testing her father for the position of dupe; his candidature had now proved completely successful; the victory of appearance over reality had been won without a single battle: she lost interest. Sometimes she suspected him of knowing the truth in his secret thoughts but refusing to admit it to himself, because this would force him to put into action an authority which he was quite content to proclaim verbally only. Perhaps he knew that not only with his wife, but with his daughter as well, that authority was a mere shadow and must not be brought out into the daylight of action. Sometimes, when she told her lies, she looked at him straight in the eyes, almost hoping to see the hateful credulity falter. But his eyes remained clear, serene — as abstract as a thinker's behind his owlish spectacles; and her suspicions would disappear before this imperurbable candour; « he is innocent, innocent, irreparably innocent; no matter what he does he will always be innocent, » she would think in despair.

So she didn't bother any more; her lies to him became simple routine. All her attention was now centered on the lies Agis would tell his wife. Agis was not very good at this, more through laziness, a kind of indifference, than through any

fundamental honesty or inability to tell lies. So Antigone's help was invaluable to him. And her inventiveness, inexhaustible. Perhaps she was inspired by the fact that the wife was completely unknown to her. (Agis obstinately refused to say anything about her). With this absent, faceless victim in the game, the unreality was complete, freedom unlimited; in front of Antigone stretched a great boundless space in which her lies could take flight like bright rapturous birds. No wonder she was intoxicated, and no wonder, too, that she was ruthless with Agis' wife, from the start.

Agis watched her admiringly as she unravelled her bold stories, ever renewed, while he lay limply on the sofa, limply expressing a dutiful compassion for the victim (« Poor woman, if she only knew... she doesn't really deserve this, you know ») a concern which, naturally, was too tepid to light any responding spark in Antigone.

These moments of inventiveness, of busy intrigue, were their gayest; perhaps their only gay moments. Antigone's pale face would flush, her eyes became bright, quick, shrewd, and she would suddenly toss back her long dank hair like a burden which she need no longer bear. They would burst out laughing suddenly, and from then on any fresh version of the alibi, any imagined new reaction from the two dupes, became an excuse for uncontrollable fits of laughter; the whole world seemed funny.

Otherwise they were a rather quiet pair. They did not make love very often, because Agis did not always feel up to it; he was very weak, and one day out of two positively ill. Antigone did not mind; she was not particularly sensual. Whether they made love or not, they would sit in their small furnished room, Agis half-reclining on the sofa, Antigone washing the cups they had used the previous time, dusting the bulky, empty, useless chest of drawers, or sitting by his side and stroking his moist palms, a thing which gave him great pleasure. He would only rouse himself from his happy drowsiness to ask Antigone for another cup of Turkish coffee. He never had enough of it, he would drink seven or eight cups in an afternoon. Antigone had grown used to the dry, rather acrid taste of Turkish coffee on his tongue when she kissed him — it was all part of the warmth Agis represented

for her, his warm being — just as she had grown used to the faint smell of ether he carried with him after his daily injection, and the continuous delicate sweat that covered him, and the limp white body which she could lift in her arms without the slightest difficulty. All this — the warm, particular being of Agis — bred in her a feeling as intense as desire, but sturdier, and stiller, which sought duration, pure, colourless duration, far more than the satisfaction of an outburst. She could burn like this for hours.

Most of Antigone's feelings took this form: a constant, steady concentration, without flashes, without visible light. But there was something indestructible about them.

One morning at the chemist's, Antigone found Agis with a woman. She was holding his coat, neatly folded over her arm, while he weighed himself. She was his wife. When Agis got off the weighing-machine, taking his time, he pretended he had only just noticed Antigone's presence. He then proceeded immediately to introduce her to his wife, with a slightly repulsive, patronizing nonchalance: « My dear, I want you to meet my my 'young friend', » he said. There was no alternative for him but to introduce her, for the chemist had seen them talking to each other, leaving his shop together, and would have found it strange if he ignored her now.

To Antigone's ears the term « my young friend » and the way in which he said it held something so lewd and leering — a kind of senile lewdness — in its paternal inflexions, that she would have been much less shocked if he had plainly said « my mistress. » However, the formula was right, it was what the circumstances demanded; the formula was what mattered most. She had found out that inflexions, expressions of the face — all the things that give life to the formula — were far less important (far less dangerous) than one thought. One thought them important only because when one lied, one was so obsessed with sincerity. And indeed in the fluctuations, the arbitrariness of lying, Antigone was growing much more clearly aware of the nature of the absolute than people who never lie. Duplicity was her apprenticeship for that single-mindedness which was to become her vocation.

Agis' wife was a short, plump creature — not quite woman, and no longer a girl, though she had a round girlish face. Her manner was diffident, her movements nervous; that was immediately apparent, from the way she shook Antigone's hand. She wore a thick coat, a navy blue scarf; her head was bare. Antigone believed she was not the good housewife type either; housekeeping, the constant contact with practical matters gave one a kind of assurance, balance. This woman's life must have been merely a continuous, muttered, frightened monologue, divorced from the material world, yet with none of the freedom, the detachment of the abstract. Her emotions were her daily routine, a routine as obsessively monotonous as a morning at the office.

When Agis said goodbye to the chemist and made as if to follow Antigone out in the street as usual, his wife jumped up from her chair and cried out: « Where are you going, dear? » There was no accusation in her voice, not even surprise, only fear. « Get up, » said Agis smiling, « we shall walk part of the way together. I think we are all going in the same direction. » He was tender to his wife, he was tender to both of them, and he looked very happy. Antigone was absent-minded. Her curiosity — not that it had been very intense — had been satisfied within the first few minutes. Before this meeting, Agis' wife had been a vague figurehead; now she had acquired a form, but she still remained a figurehead, nothing more. There was nothing to be said, nothing to be exchanged, or changed. After her father, her mother, the girl-friend who was supposed to have been operated for appendicitis, the few odd people that she knew, here was one more telegraph-pole planted along her narrow road of life; the very most one could say about these objects was that they gave one a sense of orientation: where to go, where not to go.

When she said good-bye to Agis and his wife, at the street-corner, all she thought was: « Now that I know what she looks like, it won't be so much fun inventing lies for her; but at least I will be able to choose the stories better. » She was a practical person, and efficacy was a positive compensation for lack of freedom. After all, this was no dilettante occupation, no lying for the sake of lying. She never forgot that she had begun to lie because she had to.

But there came a day when Agis' wife actually discovered their relationship; and then the second cycle of lies was closed and a far uglier game began. Antigone found that ruthlessness must be followed to its amazing end; there was no other way — it was in her nature to travel in a straight line.

It had happened like this: Agis said his wife had seen them leaving the little furnished room together one evening. It was stupid of them, they should have left separately. He sounded tired saying this, or rather more indifferent than tired — as if this were no longer his business; as if he knew there was some ultimate protection for him somewhere. He said: « She was not angry, she was frightened; and she wept a lot. I have no idea what her intentions are. »

Antigone wondered at this indifference of his. What made him so safe? She tried to imagine what it would have been like if her father had found out instead of the wife: it would surely have meant a great shattering of worlds; yes, the way she had often pictured it, with dread and desire; reality at last marching against appearance, and shattering it; this very thing which she had come to believe impossible. And what would happen afterwards? What would take the place of the shattered forms? Would it be love? Was it true that love could only stand on a ground of truth?

Yet now that there was truth between Agis and his wife, truth between the two women, what had come of it? no destruction or rebirth; simply Agis' final indifference; and Antigone, unswayed, following her ruthlessness to its end.

Against the long green sea, against the long hours of the journey on the deck of the dripping ship, the old man pursued his monologue, while Antigone carried her own thoughts, like a stone, in her closed mind.

They were clear of the mainland, and the sea was rough. Most of the passengers stayed in the smoking-room, playing cards and backgammon, drinking coffee, talking, and finding out whatever shallow mysteries there were to be had about each other. The other mystery — the mystery of the old man and his daughter — remained static. They did not try to do anything more about it. The steward from Zante gave out cryptic, knowing remarks about them, but they did not listen.

Curiosity had settled, folded up on a picture that was satisfactory: a loss, a grief, a great devotion. It was enough.

Antigone and her father were the only ones who stayed up on deck after dinner in spite of the weather. Some of the passengers tried to interfere, give advice: « An old man like him — is it wise, my dear? He might catch cold. » Antigone lowered her eyes, murmured: « Since he insists... » concealing under a show of filial obedience her determination not to shield her father from anything. However, the old man allowed himself to be wrapped in a plaid; but his head he stubbornly kept bare; and received the cold sea spray with closed eyes and the same tender, happy, wounded face with which he listened to Antigone when she echoed, dutifully, his accusations against himself, the horror of what he had done.

But when night came, their first night at sea, he grew feverish, restless. They slept in the same cabin; it was long, narrow and very hot, for it was next to the engine-room. This was the first time they spent a night in the same room. They did not undress. He only took off his thick black tie and his shoes. Antigone took off her dress, and put a black cardigan over her black petticoat. The air was stuffy with illness and old age, the smell of an old man's sweat. Antigone did not sweat because, as usual, she was so still. She watched the high waves squashing themselves against the low porthole of the cabin, a packet of heavy white linen. She listened to the grunts and groans of her father in the bunk below as he tried to turn over in his fitful sleep. At last he cried out, fully awake. Antigone came down to him, found his glasses for him.

« Antigone, Antigone, I can't sleep. It's no use, » he said. « Should we have gone away? Should we? Now it seems as if everything were starting all over again; as if it had happened yesterday. But so much the better. I must not hope to forget, so soon. » He gripped her by the arm, as if fearing she might go up to her bunk again.

« Antigone, I haven't told you the whole truth, » he groaned. « It's worse than you think. I must tell you the whole truth, so that nothing will stand between us. Love must be grounded on truth. You remember that fatal day; you remem-

ber the quarrel I told you about; it was much worse than the quarrel that brought me to your room that other night — the night I hit her. This last time I did not hit her; but it was worse; terrible things were said. I had never hated her so much, and I had never been so helpless in my hatred. In a moment of anger, she tore up all my business correspondence. The correspondence I had been filing so carefully over the past ten years. She said that now perhaps I would be cured of all my foolish ideas, and face reality, and try to make life easier for those who supported me. Yes, she tore up every single letter. 'This ridiculous correspondence', she said. Then, before leaving for her afternoon lessons, she told me that if I didn't like the way she looked after me, why didn't I go somewhere else? 'Go somewhere else', she said. Go somewhere else! And there I was, pinned to my chair. And the big town hall around me, which had grown unknown and alien through many years of illness. And my pockets empty and my wishes meaningless and nothing but necessity pressing in on me, a single force. She left; I remained in the empty house. I wanted to destroy something. How I longed for action. But there was no relief. I waited, and I could hardly breathe. It was only later that I discovered that there is always a possibility for action, even for the prisoner, the slave, the buried.

« You know the rest. How she came back late at night, and rang the bell, for she had forgotten her keys. You were out, studying with that friend of yours for your exams. And how she turned away, getting no answer, after what seemed an eternity of ringing, and walked away blindly in the rain. She must have been distraught; her nerves were not as strong as she tried to make us believe — poor household hero; I know how distraught she could get, in her silent, haggard way. And then the murderous avenue. I remember crossing it one day, leaning on your arm, Antigone — once only — when you took me to the hospital for that blood tests. I shall never forget it. That steel-coloured desert stretching out, arching a smooth back like a beast, and the madness of the long, low motor-cars screaming along it — They never stopped, nothing seemed able to stop them. Nothing between one pavement and the other, not a roundabout, not a road island, not a policeman, The

avenue left to itself, screaming mad, all that streaming steel — Yet they did stop; they did stop for an old man limping across on the arm of his daughter. I wouldn't believe it, I didn't dare look; but you said: 'don't worry, they will stop for us.' And you led me... But they didn't stop for your mother, that wet night. She was caught up in all the steel, the blue lights, the rain... »

It was no longer the old monologue; he was raving. She did not stop him. She only searched his face, anxiously. « Is this despair? is this despair, at last? » But after a brief panting silence, he got a grip on himself, caught her arm again, and looked at her straight in the eyes.

« And during that time you thought I was sleeping. Her relatives, everybody, thought I was sleeping, and that was why I didn't answer the door. Antigone, I'm telling you now that I was wide awake. I heard every single peal of that doorbell. This as my way out, my action. All the time she was ringing the bell, I was staring at her bunch of keys, shining on my desk. I had seen them there immediately after she left. I had foreseen it all — except the avenue. But that is no excuse: I sent her out there. That night was my doing, mine alone. You can say that I killed her. Say it. It is true. »

He tore off his glasses, fell back on his pillows, exhausted. His eyes were closed, he did not even look at Antigone, he was so certain she must be appalled by his revelation. She did not tell him that there was nothing new in the story for her; he had told her all this from the very first day, the morning after the accident; and then he had forgotten about it, perhaps because he was old and obsessed, perhaps because he wanted to forget it and then remember it, forget and remember in order to have an opportunity to accuse himself afresh.

« You see, Antigone, I am a criminal, » he said, opening his eyes, for he believed he had given her enough time to take it all in, and she was now ready for the final certainty, the statement. « Your father is a criminal. »

Antigone still did not move. She kept the stony, white, expressionless face which had always been such a great help to her in other circumstances, in the time of the lies; the face in which he loved to lip-read his condemnation.

She was not appalled; not in the least appalled. There

was no horror; only pity, grey weary pity at the smallness and the blindness of events, the stupidity of coincidences, the tiny petty actions dragging huge consequences on their backs like unnatural humps; above all, pity for a man who had not been able to conduct his own crime, and clamoured in vain for the fateful hump as his own, his very own.

She turned off the light, but remained at his side. She kept to her difficult silence in the dark, while he tossed and sighed and raved. « I am a criminal, » he repeated in a loud, odd whisper, both elated and frightened. She could not bring herself to say « yes », like the first time he had asked confirmation of her, at the beginning of the journey. Nor could she refute him. She could never say: « You are no criminal. It is much simpler. You are a pitiful man who was selfish, ignorant, and had not the gift of dignity. »

She thought: yet it isn't simpler, really. It was the other way round. Crime, pure, complete crime was simplest; that was absolute simplicity. With its clear voice, it forced acceptance on one, like orders from above; the humility it brought was unquestioning. Crime had singled her father out, and he was unworthy of it. He had not the stature for it. He must pay not for his crime, but for his ignorance; and the price for that was much higher. Looking down at the floundering old man tossed on those ambiguous tides of remembering and forgetting, accepting and rejecting — looking down on this man who still wanted to live, she wondered how she would ever lead him to the complete despair that had lodged itself so perfectly, like a stone, in her own soul.

But she could not speak. All that she knew now with some certainty — Antigone the justiciary — was that *she* was finished, had been weighed and judged, and that it was this other, imperfect guilt, her father's, that now demanded — deserved — all possible attention, all possible love.

All possible love; the need was urgent. Who dared say it mattered whether a love such as this was grounded upon truth or not?

Antigone could not forget how much kinder guilt had been to her; it had attacked her quickly, with perfect precision, like a hawk; and not till the very end.

After their affair had been discovered, she had not expected to see Agis' wife again; as if the breaking out of truth would exile the woman forever from everyday life, from the common flow, in which one met people, talked, sat down, moved about. The fact that Agis' wife knew about them drove her back into a state of unreality and abstraction; Antigone was not used to the truth.

For this reason she was quite taken aback when she came upon Agis' wife at the chemist's one morning. There was the woman, quite real, sitting anxiously on the edge of a chair. Agis was not with her. She seemed to have been waiting for Antigone. She jumped up when she saw her, then sat down again and turned aside, patiently, politely — but fidgety — till Antigone had received her prescription from the chemist. Then she went up to Antigone and asked her, very nervously, if she had some time to spare, because she would very much like to have a word with her. Antigone nodded obediently and they went out into the street. They were both extremely awkward. Antigone didn't dare speak; she had to remind herself all the time that she could no longer tell lies to this woman; and now there seemed to be nothing else to say.

In front of a rather smart tea-shop, Agis' wife asked Antigone whether she would like to go in and have something. She mumbled some excuse about her house being too far away for them to go there. She did not wait for Antigone's acquiescence, but led her straight into the tea-shop, which was astonishing, if one considered what a timorous creature she was. But the fact that she was in the right and Antigone in the wrong gave her a unconsolious assurance.

In the tea-shop, some time went by before they got their order. Here again Agis's wife did not consult Antigone; she ordered, in a low, shy, but unhesitating voice, a quantity of rich creamy cakes; and insisted that Antigone should eat at least three. Antigone felt as if she were being taken out by a distant elderly aunt who still considered her a schoolgirl.

They gorged themselves in sad dreary silence for several minutes. Then Agis' wife drank a big glass of water, wiped her mouth carefully and turned to Antigone; but she did not look up at her.

« Please listen to me, Miss Antigone, » she said ceremo-

niously, in a tone that contrasted ludicrously with the elderly aunt attitude. « Please listen. I am asking you to leave my husband alone. »

Faced with the absolute barrenness of this statement, pressed to the wall, Antigone in spite of herself came out with the exact expression of what she was feeling.

« I don't want to leave him, » she said bluntly.

Agis' wife stared. She suddenly looked very stupid.

« You have no business with him, » she said. « He is a very sick man. And you are a young girl... » She let the odd argument trail off, and came back again with: « I am asking you to leave him. »

Antigone could only repeat: « I don't want to leave him. » She never thought of adding that Agis was the only real thing in her life. There were no excuses, no justifications or explanations on either side. They both sat at their tiny marble-topped table, painfully trapped in their desert of truth.

In order to break the silence, Antigone said: « May I have some more water? »

Agis' wife agreed, with a kind of absent-minded eagerness. She still held her handkerchief (with which she had wiped her cream-smearred mouth) clutched tightly between her fingers, like a sea-sick person on a boat. She said mournfully: « We have been married ten years. I know all about him, all about this illness... Life is very difficult... So many worries... »

« I know. My father is very sick too. He has been invalid for many years. »

Agis' wife asked Antigone a few polite questions about her father.

After another long silence, she turned to Antigone and said (as if she had never heard Antigone's double refusal): « Well, you will leave him alone now, won't you? »

Antigone didn't answer this time. She was quite convinced now that the truth did not lead anywhere. She also realised suddenly — with a certain sense of excitement — that she could just get up and go. There was nothing Agis' wife could do about it.

« But Miss Antigone » the woman stammered hurriedly when she saw Antigone leaving her chair; and made as if to follow her. But the waiter stopped her, presenting her with

the bill. Obediently, shyly she sat down again to pay it, while Antigone stepped out into the street, head high, limbs free, but her face quite unchanged.

She forgot about Agis' wife very quickly. The only impression the woman had left was a sense of oppressiveness, and this she got rid of at once, as one takes off an old jacket. She knew how to deal with dull, depressing people; most of her parents' friends and relations were of that kind. She had learnt to ignore them, to gaze right through them as she sat in her perfect, self-made vacuum, beyond boredom. In the case of Agis' wife, even her close connection with Agis had not been able to make her opaque, and real, in Antigone's eyes. The privacy of Antigone's feelings was quite impregnable.

That was not the end of Antigone's dealings with Agis' wife, however. One afternoon, at home, she received a telephone-call from her. The woman was much more eloquent — or rather more garrulous — on the telephone than she had been in the tea-shop. She carried on a hurried, breathless mumble, uninterrupted for several minutes. Once more it was mostly about her husband's illness, mysterious necessities, explanations that explained nothing, strange flat statements that held neither anger nor entreaty. Antigone understood only half the things she said. She hardly said anything herself. For one thing, Agis' wife would not let her put in a word; in the second place, she didn't dare say much because her father was in the next room. She had to pretend it was somebody she didn't know, somebody who was asking for information. She stuck to the safe phrase: « I don't think I can help you. » It served both purposes; it was suitable for the ears of both her father and Agis' wife. In this rediscovered ambiguity she felt at home once more, and remained unruffled throughout the telephone conversation.

But Agis' wife telephoned again, not once, several times. Antigone couldn't very well play the same comedy every time. Her father was growing suspicious. One day, he hobbled up behind Antigone as noiselessly as he could and snatched the receiver from her hands. He jammed it to his ear, saying as an excuse: « Let your father deal with this tiresome person, »

for he wanted to preserve some semblance of dignity in his actions. Agis' wife, unaware that the receiver had changed hands, went on babbling mournfully along. But Antigone's father was slightly deaf, especially on the telephone; all he was able to understand from the strange sounds which came through was that Antigone's interlocutor was a woman, not the dangerous male he had suspected; and this was all he wanted to know. « My dear lady..., » he began almost gaily, such was his relief. However, Agis' wife immediately took fright at the sound of a man's voice, and hung up hastily. It suddenly occurred to Antigone that the poor woman had not for one moment thought of reporting the whole matter to her father, which would have been the surest and easiest way of separating Antigone from Agis. It was evident that she was in no way prepared to follow her actions to their ruthless end, as Antigone was.

However, though Agis' wife was unable to go to extremes, she persevered in her own stodgy little course, dogged and laborious as an ant. She telephoned again and again. Antigone was slowly becoming exasperated. She never told Agis about the calls; probably because she had omitted to mention the first one, out of repulsion for anything that reminded her of the stubborn, depressing little woman and the awful sterility of their dealings. Besides, Agis' indifference made her suspect that he did not like to be bothered about such things, and that in spite of his serious manner and quiet tastes he was, in his own way, a kind of 'good time man', with all the finished selfishness the term implied. So their small furnished room remained a closed, unruffled circle.

But Agis' wife was beginning to lose patience as well; perhaps it would be more correct to say, for a person of her kind, to lose hope. She was in the right; why, then, was nothing happening, why did the girl not understand? She began to realise, slowly and painfully in her dense, slow mind, that there was something invincible in Antigone's phrase: « I am afraid I cannot help you. »

So she committed a grave mistake: she appealed to Antigone, she took her into her confidence. On the telephone one afternoon her voice became agitated, conspiratorial. « Listen to me, Miss Antigone, » she began as usual, « my

husband is very ill. » Then there was a break, a silence during which she breathed heavily. Finally she went on: « You don't know how ill he is because he hasn't told you; and he hasn't told you because he doesn't know. Only I know. Shall I tell you what I know? Are you listening to me, miss Antigone? My husband is very ill, he has leukaemia. Do you know what leukaemia is? He won't be with me much longer. Now we both know, and now you will leave him alone, because I must look after him. What business would you have with a dying man? Illness is the most terrible thing in the world. I know how to look after him, I know what's wrong with him; so you leave him alone and look after your kind father... Life is so difficult. You understand me now. »

Antigone only said: « I am sorry. I am very sorry. » Once again, the phrase was ambiguous; it could have been meant in a condoling sense; it could also have been the expression of a final refusal. But when she walked away from the telephone that afternoon, her face did not remain unchanged. For once Agis' wife had left a mark.

Antigone felt it most when she saw Agis again. Their evenings together had already undergone a certain change, from the fact that they no longer had to prepare lies for Agis' wife. There were no more fits of gaiety and inspiration; their time passed by silently and uneventfully; not that they were less close for that.

But after Agis's wife had told Antigone that Agis was suffering from leukaemia, their silence became different. Antigone watched Agis... While she prepared his coffee, while he sprawled so indolently on the couch, she watched. She tried to fit the information to him, to place the fatal disease within the frame of that warm, frail body... She did not succeed at first. It would not fit. The whole idea broke up into absurd bits, and she had to start again. One evening she took him in her arms and felt a sudden new thrill race through her blood, and found she loved him more intensely, with a kind of anguish which had not been there before. Perhaps that was when she began, at last, to believe in the disease. And then it was done: belief settled in. She knew, and he didn't know. She refused to chatter about medicine any more. When he weighed himself — so scrupulously — at the che-

mist's, she turned her eyes away. And in the furnished room, she no longer played about idly with his tubes of pills as she had liked to do when they sat comfortably together. A strange oppression grew in her.

With growing desperation, she came to see that Agis, who had been the only real thing in her life, was now being separated from her by a lie, by the familiar spectre of Appearance. Here too, as with her father, truth had become impossible. She must invent yet another form of pretending. She must see things double once more. Looking at Agis, she must be plagued by the contradiction: « I know — he does not know. He believes he is ill; I know he will die. »

Looking at Agis, she often had bursts of bitter revolt, and thought: « What would it be like if he knew? » For she was unable to bear the inequality between them, and the new distance, where they had been so close.

In this way it is quite possible that her mind had already been long prepared for the reply which she gave Agis' wife the next time she telephoned.

Antigone had blindly thought she would not telephone again, that it was not possible for her to telephone again, there was nothing more to be said after that memorable piece of information. So when she picked up the receiver and heard the well-known voice again, she went dead-cold and vibrant, a kind of petrified hysteria; and seeing her father (who had heard the telephone ring) hobble towards her inquisitively, she scaled the last step sweepingly, as if goaded by panic; and whispered into the receiver hastily, but very clearly: « If you don't stop telephoning me, I shall tell Agis the truth about his illness. »

Tell Agis the truth. Truth! Never had it been so repulsive; at the same time, never had it tempted her so powerfully. Agis' wife, speechless, rang off.

The game between Antigone and Agis' wife came to an end a week before her mother got killed in the accident. It ended with a complete catastrophe, leaving a scene bathed in unrelieved ugliness.

After her threat on the telephone, Antigone's blackmail

had followed a monotonous, unadventurous course, like most blackmail. Her threats became more and more concise, and her demands more numerous, more exorbitant. Now it was Antigone who telephoned Agis' wife; it was Antigone who insisted that Agis should be left alone; he must be asked no questions if he came back home late; there must be no scenes, even if he stayed away a whole day. If Agis' wife wanted Antigone to keep quiet, she must pay for it by complete self-obliteration. One silence against another. She must cease to exist. Antigone even suggested that she should go away somewhere in the country for a while.

Perhaps she hoped in this way to muffle every trace of the woman's presence and the mortal message it carried, the deadly grey breath, and make the world in the little furnished room whole again. It did not work. Agis remained the tiny incongruous figure which one sees strolling alone, unknowing, at the bottom of a dangerous limelighted arena. Now she hated his indifference, his insouciance. She almost hated him for not knowing; for not knowing the thing she most passionately wished never to have known.

As for Agis' wife she only telephoned at rare intervals now, to beg Antigone to keep her promise, to make sure she could count on one more week of silence.

One afternoon, she telephoned Antigone not to beg for anything, not to make sure of anything, not for any particular purpose, it seemed, except to give vent to a crazy, incoherent flow of grief. The stodgy little voice was frightened and desperate; it had the blind loudness one sometimes hears in children's voices. She sobbed uncontrollably. The only information Antigone was able to gather from her was that she had seen Agis' doctor that morning. There was nothing new, really; only confirmation, only a repetition of the verdict, a reminder of its inevitability. And the strange woman had telephoned Antigone as she would have telephoned her best friend, simply to speak of her grief. « What shall we do, Miss Antigone? » she kept saying, « what shall we do now? » She was unaware of rivalries, enmities, conflicts; there was only death; it was simple.

As Antigone listened to her, she was possessed by a sudden uncontrollable fury; fury against this simplicity of death and

its power; against the ease with which it had submerged everything, after all her efforts, covered all the lies, the manoeuvres of a love affair under a sheet of heavy water, so that now it was all one, all death and hopelessness; everything reduced to the single unbearable fact. And fury against this woman who had accepted the fact so completely, and who, in her innocence, had even brought it to Antigone to have her take part in its contemplation.

In bristling silence Antigone listened to the woman's sobbing. Finally, like a person mortally insulted, beside herself, she whispered in a strangled voice: « How dare you, how dare you... » and broke off the communication.

Now she was fully possessed. Hating this truth that had so cruelly mastered her, she must now serve it blindly, spread it like a Gospel, or a disease.

Snatching her coat, Antigone made for the door. Her father was having his siesta and did not hear her leave the house.

Once in the street, she realized she did not know where to go. Her appointment with Agis was not till two hours later. Yet even in her purposelessness, her steps were rapid and clear on the pavement, as she went up one street and down another; so great was the force that drove her. She walked like this for some time; the pace never faltered.

Suddenly she made a sharp turn and headed straight for the chemist's.

Even before she entered the shop, through the glass front, she saw them: Agis and his wife. Behind a yellow pyramid of Kolynos toothpaste, there was the picture, the two heads just showing: Agis looking downward, his wife turned toward him, saying something gentle, her hand about to touch his sleeve. In the background, the chemist's head, at his invisible business. It was a quiet scene. To Antigone it was outrageous, unbearable. She was stifled by this chemical peace that meant nothing, and she must break through. All this was so tangible that she had quick mad dreams of crashing through the mountain of yellow tubes, above which the puppet heads moved. Breaking through, reaching through — to what?

But she merely stepped into the shop, quite slowly. She stood in the middle of it, looking at the two creatures.

It all happened at the same time:

Agis' wife saying: « Miss Antigone. I... »

The chemist saying: « Agis, here's your prescription. »

And Antigone saying, crying: « Why do you take all this medicine? What's the use of it? Why do you let them fool you? »

Silence immediately crashed in. Agis' wife, silently, put her hand to her mouth. Agis had his back turned to the two women, in the act of taking his parcel from the counter where the chemist had put it. His hand paused for a moment, as if pinned there by the silence, then it began to creep back once more toward the counter.

Agis snatched his parcel away quickly and slunk out of the shop like a thief.

Antigone leapt after him, reached the door which had hardly had time to close. Through her still muzzled mouth, through her white knuckles, Agis' wife sobbed: « I'll go away tomorrow. I promise you, I promise you. »

Antigone soon caught up with Agis. When he saw her come up level with him, he turned and stopped a taxi, still smooth and deft and thieflike, his face showing only the thief's intentness in what he is doing. He tried to slam the taxi-door after him; his arms were thin, muscleless, he did not succeed. The taxi-driver waited patiently for the door to shut before he started. Antigone slipped into the car; without pause she flung to the driver the address of the little furnished room.

Agis crouched in a corner of the seat and went quite passive. Antigone caught his two wrists in an iron grip, and one could not tell, she could not tell whether this was an attempt to stop him from escaping or a gesture of passion, to take the place of words. Her heart beat deafeningly, and they were like two people dashing off somewhere to make love, paralysed, strangled by desire and impatience.

But once in the room, the two bodies did not come together, the thumping was not eased, the locked passion did not break. Nothing happened. Taking three small steps.

Agis went and stood with his face against the wall, and did not speak or move.

Antigone wrenched herself out of the deadlock and moving forward, she brutally grasped his narrow shoulders. She shook him: « Didn't you hear what I said in the shop? Why don't you speak? Don't you want to know? Or do you know already? You've got to speak to me! »

No sound came from the slight, erect body. She shook him, and told him. She cried the strange spiky word: leukaemia, several times at the turned back. She shouted at the top of her voice, as if to convince herself that she was not merely echoing the dreadful voice on the telephone, the inexorable decision. Perhaps she even thought she had made the decision; she was the killer; for that was preferable to blind necessity.

Agis let himself be shaken, a creature filled with sawdust. He kept his face to the wall. The frail, bird's shoulder-blades were beautifully flexible in her strong hands, they cried for destruction.

At last he turned. It was the same passive face. Yet not the same; he was shut away now in an indifference far more formidable than any he had shown until then; the rapturous indifference of a man occupied with his own death; at last fully occupied, fully given over.

He moved away from the wall. He did not listen to a word she said.

Antigone struggled with all her strength; she shouted, she begged, she battered herself against this incomprehensible thing, this wreckage which truth had made. Unhearing, he crossed the room and said lightly: « I must go home now. Goodbye, goodbye. »

She stretched out her hands; he was gone; there was nothing; it was as if her hands had never touched him, they were so empty. This was what death meant. This was Agis' death. And it belonged to her, cupped in her own two empty hands.

It was her awakening; swift and precise like a hawk attacking. It stamped out all that had gone before. There was only Agis' face — pale, entranced, horrifying, even though it was perhaps a happy face in its final indifference. The

evil of that scene stood out all by itself, naked, divorced of past and future. It would never be absorbed by life, by all the things that transform human actions as they are lived out. This evil was indigestible as stone.

So this was the finishing-point — hideous in its desolation. She tried to turn away from it, but could not. There was nothing else. She was left alone with herself; and she hated herself completely. She thought with horror of the long years ahead of living in this company. She considered killing herself; yet that peculiar sense of justice in her finally made her reject the idea of suicide; she did not believe herself worthy of it. In the end, with a great flat despair, a beginning of the deadening that was to come, she decided she would have to endure herself, carry the act along like a stone, without hate, without love, without much thought even, simply holding it and knowing it was hers.

It was in this still, frozen state that her mother's accident found her.

On the morning of her mother's death, Antigone stepped out of the shadows and came to life; for she had been as if dead during the week that preceded the accident.

She had not known her mother did not sleep in the house that night; she had come home quite late and found the place in darkness, which had seemed natural at the time.

But in the morning there had been the strange furtive presence of her father in the kitchen preparing his own breakfast. As a rule, her mother did this for him. He was eating it silently, huddled in a chair at the cold kitchen table, in the grey kitchen light, like a beggar eating a crust of bread on a doorstep.

When she asked him where her mother was, he looked up at her almost in fear and said: « She is not here. I don't know where she is. I don't know what has happened to her. » She realized at once, with a shock of recognition, that he was not telling her the whole truth. He knew more than he admitted. At last the roles were reversed, and she suddenly found him down, down at her own level.

She asked him why he had not called her, so that she might prepare his breakfast for him. He turned his face away and muttered that he had not wanted to disturb her. That too

was a lie, but the strange new humility behind it was genuine.

Then there had been the telephone-call from the police station, announcing the accident.

He had not broken down at the news; on the contrary. He emerged from his shrunken, shifting posture, and suddenly assumed the stark simplicity of a man standing against a wall. « I did it, » he said at once. « I locked her out last night. We had a bad quarrel. » He was shaking very badly, from head to toe, but there was nothing degrading about this, no more than there would have been in a man shaking with a high temperature. Antigone tried to make him sit down in his old armchair; but he leaned with all his weight on his walking-stick against the wall, and refused to move. His mouth was dry, Antigone saw him swallowing several times, very fast. She tried to support him; their hands met. He grasped her fingers and held them very tightly, with a strength she had not suspected in him, and looked at her wildly, nakedly, full in the face. Antigone returned the gaze passionately. Her heart thumped hard, as though in front of a precipice. This was the first time in their whole lives that they were looking at each other.

The police wanted Antigone to come and identify the body. They said the father's presence was not necessary — one relative was enough. But the old man wanted to go with her; he said so tentatively, questioningly, as if asking Antigone's permission, or her guidance. She gave it without hesitation, with loving thoroughness: « Yes, you must come, » she said. She would spare him nothing. She was passionate and ruthless; as ruthless as she had been to herself, after the final scene with Agis, when she knew she was finished, weighed, judged. They were together now; her father had come to her, in the horror of this death, which he had caused; and of the other death. There was no call for pity, because they were together, they were one. Pity implies distance. Pity separates. They belonged to the same family; the blood bond was now strong, level, and direct.

She did not accuse him, and she did not sympathise with him, even after they had seen the mutilated body; simply, she was with him. It was Antigone's most absolute moment. All her past lies and divisions resolved themselves in this

extraordinary communion. Her apprenticeship was completed. The swarming, sprouting lies had brought out this one perfect blossom.

At first, her father said he had been asleep when his wife rang the doorbell. But as if infected by Antigone's ruthlessness, he followed the trail of his crime to its dark end and soon confessed the whole truth. He had not been asleep; he had heard the bell, he had deliberately locked her out. At the end of his confession, Antigone was there to receive him, in perfect readiness. She took her place in his life.

When Antigone saw her father standing against the wall, more horrified than frightened, hating what was done and could not be undone, she thought she recognized all that she had been through herself. It was like coming back, from a cold and distant death, into a room filled with people. So there were others; there was one other, as close to her as one could possibly be; a father and a brother. Closer than the indifferent, invulnerable Agis had ever been. Her exile was over. That was why she was able to suggest, with such ease, their actual exile to the island. They were both already cut away from the world; yet together they were a world in themselves. So they must keep to it, make it as separate as possible.

Her father was surprised, he had not thought of this solution. They had not visited the island for many years. The property had never yielded much.

« There is nothing for us here now, in this town, » said Antigone. And she meant it. She thought that the main reason she was taking her father away was that she could no longer see Agis. Agis was gone from her, gone, snapped away, worse than dead; perhaps dead. There was nothing to keep her in town. It was her astonishing, almost inhuman humility that made her invent this selfish motive. She hardly dared admit the strange new devotion to her father, out of humility, out of shyness, too. She was very shy with him at first. She had never been demonstrative, and this great change between them only made her clumsier than usual. He did not notice; a certain reserve was part of what he believed filial behaviour should be.

Clumsily, shyly, but firmly as well, she insisted about the island. He must come. There was no other way. In persuading him she was helped by this inner compulsion of hers, pointing toward the island. Blindly she longed for the dead quiet, the finality they would find there. Finality not for herself; for her father. Because he had left everything incomplete, unfinished. She knew it now: her father lagged behind; he wavered, he suffered, he was alive; this was not guilt as she knew it. The fraternity she had glimpsed on the morning of the accident was not to be, not yet. Perhaps it would never be. Still, his crime must be finished off for him, in the quiet and finality of the island. One does not go back, one does not hope to go back after such acts, said Antigone the justiciary. The guilty mess would be burnt clean, cleared of pity, of his all too human clamours. Then he would be able to rest with her.

She took her place by his side, by the wheelchair on the ship, not knowing yet how inexorable she would prove to be: for she would spare him nothing. She would lead him to her own complete despair; to the place of rest which was at the same time the place where the Furies live.

One by one, Antigone's ship left the little obscure ports on its itinerary behind it. The onlookers along the narrow piers gazed up, tiny, at the tall, tall ship, and were gradually lost from sight, a group of dumb people forgotten in a pit. Now the ship was nearing the last port. Nobody seemed pleased to be arriving. The passengers gathered their belongings with a sigh, and were ready much too early. The food had steadily grown worse, as they ran out of cheese, fresh meat, butter. The stewards had become indifferent and neglected to shave, leaving that for their first night ashore. The cows, which had been unloaded on one of the previous islands, left behind an odd feeling of emptiness. The Captain seemed to be sulking; this had been his dullest crossing, as far as passengers were concerned. Nor was there anything to look forward to once they arrived. « God-forsaken places, » he muttered, « why do people go on living in them? »

The currant-merchant kept asking Antigone: « Why are you going to that awful island? A young girl like you — you could be going to parties, and walks in the park... Look at

me. I'm only going there for business, I'll get out as soon as I possibly can. Next week, probably. How long are you going to stay? »

« We'll stay as long as we can, » said Antigone.

« Perhaps you will allow me to offer you an ice-cream on the square, one of these evenings, » he suggested with extreme politeness. He respected her.

« We shall not be living in the town. We have a small house in the country, several miles away, » said Antigone.

« Why should they want to go and live in the country? » said one of the stewards to the captain. He was the steward who came from Antigone's island, the last island. He was a steward now: a man with a salary and a uniform, a man who had travelled a great deal, and he looked down on the affairs of his native island with contempt. « Those peasants, » he sniffed, the peasants from the village where their house is — well, they're not going to like having those two there. They hate their guts. They're all Communists, anyway. All these years, no one ever thought of visiting the property. The peasants let the goats loose in the vineyards, they've drained the wells, they use the olive-trees for firewood. They've been very comfortable! And now these two come along. An old imbecile in second childhood and a girl, a mere child... they must be crazy. Who's going to bring them water, vegetables, eggs, who will work for them? Life isn't going to be easy for them, I can tell you that. I know those damn peasants well... »

But the captain had lost interest. « Can't you see they're as poor as Job? » he cried impatiently. « If anything, they're lucky they still have a house there. » And he dismissed the steward.

The story got around. Sniffing and shrugging, the steward carried it about like a bad-tempered prophet. The house, it seemed, was not even fit to be lived in. The peasants had put their hens in it. And the owners of the neighbouring property had been forced to leave, the peasants had made life so impossible for them. Somebody asked: « Is there a telephone in the village? Can they communicate with the town, if necessary? » The currant-merchant was much concerned. « That village is no place for you. Why don't you stay in town? » he

begged Antigone. « There is a little hotel, it is very cheap. Believe me... »

« That house is the only place we can go, » said Antigone.

Her father was only hazily aware of the talk that was going on. He did not ask for details. Once or twice, he made as if to address the steward from Zante, but did not dare. So he merely smiled at him, uncertainly, very timidly, a rehearsal for his future attempts to make friends with the islanders. All he said to Antigone was: « Is it going to be very bad over there? »

« Yes, » said Antigone.

He nodded and closed his eyes, baring his face once more to the sea wind.

He seemed to grow gentler as they drew near their destination. At the same time, the passengers grew kinder to him, the pity in their eyes more obvious; it was like a conspiracy of kindness on the eve of an execution. They spoke to him occasionally, they offered him oranges, some even invited him to come and see them when they reached the island. He thanked them very humbly and profusely, and refused everything. « You are too kind, » he kept saying, « you are too kind. » And he meant it.

« They should not be so kind, » he complained to Antigone sadly, « they should not be kind to a man like me, how am I to explain that to them? Besides, I am no longer in a position to return their kindnesses. I am no longer what I used to be... In the old days, I was somebody in this island, Antigone. You don't remember. And then your mother's cousin will soon tell them who I am, what I have done. Do you think he will do that? Still, let us spare them the embarrassment of our acquaintance. These good people have no business with us... »

He looked at Antigone wonderingly. « My poor child, what am I doing to you, what am I doing to your life? How can it you don't hate me? But you didn't hate me even after I killed your mother. It is the innocence in you. »

She gazed back at him mutely and very nearly sighed, very nearly envied him for his freedom to talk, to confess, to let his grief remain fluid. She had only her carved life, and that stone in her.

But Antigone had ceased to make comparisons. All she did now was wait for the day when they would fall silent together. She would never tell her father about Agis, about that other death. The two guilts must always run parallel; they could not meet. But one day they would come and lie quite close, almost touching. Hooded love would sit still, and there would be silence and peace; peace without understanding.

When the ship entered the harbour at high noon, it was assailed by a horde of vociferating porters who had come in motor-boats and sailing-boats; the waters were too shallow for the ship to come alongside. Soon the lower deck was a seething mass of people. « You will *have* to let me help you, » said the currant-merchant to Antigone, almost angrily. « Can't you see what's going on here? We'll have to lower the wheel-chair gently, very gently... »

Antigone said: « Very well. Do as you wish. » She had a vague look; she was gazing out at the flat shadowless harbour where the boats would take the passengers. The light was very white and dull. The tiny, squat houses stared. Her father accepted the currant-merchant's help silently; his objections seemed to have disappeared; at the end of the journey kindness did not matter any more. He too had his eyes fixed on the harbour.

A man in a dark suit came up the gangway. He wore a collarless shirt without a tie. His face was gaunt, unshaven, the colour of steel. It was the relative, the cousin of Antigone's mother. He pushed the people aside coldly. « So you've come, » he said to Antigone and the old man. « Is that all the luggage you have? » He smiled down at it, amused.

« We don't need much, » stammered the old man.

The cousin smiled again, insolently. « Good. » Then he turned to Antigone. « Come along now, it will be some job getting *him* down. »

He moved off briskly; he pushed the protesting currant-merchant aside, gave some orders. He asked for the ropes which had been used to unload the cows. « But the gangway... » spluttered the currant-merchant.

« It's too narrow. This is no liner. This is no seaside-resort, » the cousin said. « So what do you want? What do you

want anyway? » Once again he had a vastly amused smile. « He'll be all right. Watch and see. »

The old man seemed to panic for a moment. He searched desperately for one face in the crowd — the face of the steward from the island. When he found it, he questioned it, appealed mutely. But the steward, brooding and detached, refused to take back a single one of his prophecies; refused all hope. Then the old man turned to Antigone. She said nothing.

The porters looped the old man up deftly, wheelchair and all, in the thick knotted ropes, like a bundle, like a cow, while the cousin shouted out his cool, savage orders. The first-class passengers made way for him, forgot to hurry. For a moment, the wheelchair dangled ludicrously in mid-air. Upon deck, the captain watched sullenly. Antigone followed.

ANTHOLOGY OF POLISH POETRY

TRANSLATED BY BURNS SINGER
AND JERZY PETERKIEWICZ

CHARM

*Rosie, rosaiden: there were three maidens.
Our Lady, Mary, walked on the sea and plucked a garland
of gold foam.
And then Saint John came down and asked: « Why are you
walking, my dear? »
« It's sure to cure my son. »*

ANONYMOUS (15th. Century)

SONG

*What do you want of us, great God, who gives
Limitless favour to each thing that lives?
The Church will not contain you, you, entire
In every inch of water, land and fire.*

*Riches is useless since to you alone
Belongs each jewel that man thinks his own.
A grateful heart, great God, is all that can
Be offered to you by poor things like man.*

*You built the sky, embroidered galaxies
And sketched foundations so that from them rise
Perimeters too huge for men to trace:
Earth's nakedness you covered with green grace.*

*Great God of all the world, the sea obeys
Your vast commands and keeps to its set ways.
The rivers richen. Day knows when to dawn.
Night and the twilight linger and are gone.*

*The Spring brings garlands and the Summer wears
A crown of wheat like girls who dance at fairs.
Autumn dispenses apples, wine and mirth.
Then winter sluggishly prepares the earth.*

*At night your gardeners spray each plant with dew.
By day your rain wakes withering plants anew.
The beasts eat at our hand and every sense
Is nourished by you with munificence.*

*Immortal God, grace most continual,
Be praised for ever. Keep us where we shall
Best serve your purpose, now and when we die
Safe in the shadow of your wings that fly.*

JAN KOCHANOWSKI (1530-1584)

LAMENT VIII

*This house grows very empty now you've gone
My dearest Ursula, and there is not one
Among the many who remain with me
Who can replace your vanished soul; or free
Us from the misery of your absent song,
Your talks and jokes that got the facts all wrong.
You hid in corners and your mother smiled.
You tugged your father's sleeve and so beguiled
Him from the thoughts that soured his bit of brain.*

*You laughed as you embraced them both again.
But now you're silent and these empty rooms
Hold nothing playful to displace their glooms.
Our sorrows squat in corners: and delight
Is what we search for vainly, day and night.*

JAN KOCHANOWSKI

LAMENT X

*My gracious Ursula, I have lost you. Where?
In which direction? in what land? what air?
The lesser angels, are you with their hosts?
Or are you one of Charon's weeping ghosts?
Are you in Heaven? or on the Happy Isles?
Or does pale Lethe wash away your smiles?
Or are you feathered and your song as clear
As is the nightingale's? O have you shed
Your maiden graces now that you are dead?
Or do some sins remain from human clay?
Does Purgatory singe those sins away?
Have you regained the home you had before
Your birth rejoiced my heart or made it sore?
If you exist at all, pity my grief.
And, if you cannot come, for my relief,
Back in your proper shape, then as pure soul,
Mere shade, substanceless nightmare, come, console.*

JAN KOCHANOWSKI

TO A MATHEMATICIAN

*He discovered the age of the sun and he knows
Just why the wrong or the right wind blows.
He has looked at each nook of the ocean's floor
But he doesn't see that his wife is a whore.*

JAN KOCHANOWSKI

IN DEFENCE OF DRUNKARDS

*Earth, that drinks rain, refreshes the trees:
Oceans drink rivers: stars quaff up the seas:
So why should they make such a terrible fuss
Over insignificant tipplers like us?*

JAN KOCHANOWSKI

THE LAMB AND THE WOLVES

*The predator's excuse is always good.
Two wolves attacked a lamb in a dark wood.
It said: « I want your legal rights defined. »
« You're weak and tender; and it's dark. » They dined.*

IGNACY KRASICKI (1735-1801)

THE DOG

*Because of thieves, a dog barked all night through.
His master, sleepless, beat him black and blue.
On the next night the dog slept; and thieves came.
The silent dog was beaten all the same.*

IGNACY KRASICKI

CAGED BIRDS

*The young finch asked the old one why he wept:
« There's comfort in this cage where we are kept. »
« You who were born here may well think that's so
But I knew freedom once, and weep to know. »*

IGNACY KRASICKI

FAREWELL

*When any poet's brightest glory shines
His words construct a statue from his fears:
Centuries will not wipe away these lines
Nor dry their tears.*

*While you go off into a distant land
I'm left alone to watch my exile dribble
Slowly away toward death; or, pen in hand,
To sit and scribble.*

JULIUSZ SLOWACKI (1809-1849)

HYMN

COMPOSED AT SEA OFF ALEXANDRIA

*Master, my heart is sore. Your radiant West
Pours out its rainbows for me, while your deep
Blue waters quench the star that burns in quest
Of everlasting sleep:
Yet though you gild the skyline, sea and shore,
Master, my heart is sore.*

*Erect, like empty husks of corn, I am
Void of both pleasure and satiety.
Greeting a stranger, I can still seem calm
Though silent as this sky.
In front of you I must say something more.
Master, my heart is sore.*

*Petulant as an infant when his mother
Leaves him alone, I see the sky grow red.
Its last beams rise from water as I smother
The tear I almost shed.
Though dawn will bring fresh daylight as before,
Master, my heart is sore.*

*Today I watched, wedged in the blue air,
A convoy of storks, and they were flying
A hundred miles from land, still more to where
 This long low land is lying.
I've seen storks race across my native moor.
 Master, my heart is sore.*

*Since I have meditated much on death,
Since I have seldom known a home, since I
Am a poor pilgrim, trudging, out of breath,
 And lightning scars the sky:
Since time still keeps my unknown grave in store,
 Master, my heart is sore.*

*Perhaps my skeleton will whiten and
No gravestone cast its solemn shadow there,
I shall still grudge each corpse the plot of land
 That keeps it safe from air.
My bed will be as restless as it's poor.
 Master, my heart is sore.*

*At home a child will pray for me each day
Just as he has been told. And yet I know
That, as it sails, this ship takes me away,
 A mile each mile we go.
And since his prayers cannot the child restore,
 Master, my heart is sore.*

*A hundred years from now some other men
Will watch the rainbows that your angels hew
Across the starry vastness — but by then
 They will be dying too.
I reach out toward the nothing at my core.
 Master, my heart is sore.*

JULIUSZ SLOWACKI

GIVE ME A MILE OF LAND

Give me a mile of land — or even less.

*A piece of turf would serve me, friends, if there
You placed a man, one man whose fearlessness
Had freed him, soul and body, from despair.
Within his brain I'd work my spells to show
A statue with two faces, both aglow.*

Give me a planet smaller than the moon,

*A golden squadron tinkling from its tail,
And let it skim the forests, let its croon
Be hallowed by one patriot's dying wail:
Then I shall fetch unknown angelic things
And stand, wings open, on that star that sings.*

When I, my friends, implore my God to grant

*Me a poor country and the right to fight,
I seem to see our chivalries aslant
The thunder of our enemies in flight.
Hot in pursuit, I reach the stars: then sleek
Sneers of sharp light ask crudely what I seek.*

Stars, you are cold small Satans made of clay,

*Intense with disbelief. And I, half-crazed,
Am broken by your hate. Dreams make me say
That Poland burns already: and I have raised
Fountains of flame to prove my country could.
But all that burns is my own heart — like wood.*

JULIUSZ SLOWACKI

THAT ANGEL BURNING AT MY LEFT SIDE

That Angel burning at my left side

*Harps on an old string. And I am with you
Among the plains where white seagulls ride,*

*Locked in a coffin in the Siberian snow.
Hyenas howl out of the wind. Reindeer
Graze on the graves, under your sure care.*

*The roots of lilies probe my corpse. It shines,
A white goblet wonderfully transformed,
A lantern corpse that fills the night with signs,
— And the music of the soul makes silence alarmed.
You dim the lamp and ask the music to
Keep silent that my spirit may sleep through.*

*Alone, you say your prayers. You go on speaking
Into the holy sapphire. And from your hair,
Like diamonds, a chain of stars is streaking
Into the heavens — and each star is a prayer.*

JULIUSZ SLOWACKI

A CAROL

*Now Jesus visits earth.
The whole world finds rebirth
Et mentes.*

*File past the manger's stall
Small angels and more small
Ridentes.*

*Sparrows chase each other
Round the Virgin mother
Cantantes.*

*Swans stitch the simple air:
Their down shines silver there
Mutantes.*

*With down she makes a pillow
And puts it in a hollow
For the Child.*

*With hay she makes his cot
Warm as the smallest thought
That ever smiled.*

JULIUSZ SLOWACKI

PAN THADDEUS

[TRANSLATED BY HALINA ZELENSKA]

*Lithuania! Oh my homeland! Thou art like good health;
He only gives true value to such blessed wealth
Who has lost thee. Now I can sing thy beauty and see
All its pure excellence, for I long for thee.*

*Holy Virgin, of fair Tchenstohova defendor
And Vilno's shining light. Thou whose radiant splendor
Protects the loyal folk of Novogrodek borough,
As Thou hast me in childhood saved from death and sorrow
By miracle (when by a mother offered in tears
To Thy mercy, I revived, and with no more fears
Could start on a long journey to kneel at Thy shrine
And thank for life restored by a grace divine)
So wilt Thou, miraculously, bring us home again.
Meantime, carry my lonesome heart which longs in vain
Back to those wooded hills, to those pastures green,
Stretched all along the Niemen flowing blue between,
To those fields, corn-embroidered, like a shimmering sheet
Gleaming silver with rye, golden from ripe wheat,
Where amber mustard flowers, buckwheat white as snow,
Where patches of red clover with maiden blush glow,
All bound as by a ribbon with a strip of meadow,
Upon which crouching pear trees cast their peaceful shadow*

Amid such fields as those, years ago, there stood
 A Manor, on a hill by a brook and birch wood.
 The house was built of timber but founded on stone,
 Its lime-washed walls were dazzling and from afar shone
 All the whiter, for relieved against the dark green
 Of poplars, from autumn gales a most useful screen.
 The Manor, though not large, but well planned and neat,
 Possessed a spacious barn, near, three stacks of wheat
 Which the thatched ample roof could no more contain
 Proved, that the neighbourhood gave abundant grain;
 Just as it was apparent from stocks in long rows
 Thick as stars on the meadows, from the many ploughs
 Cutting early in season into the black soil
 Of immense fallow fields, which through endless toil
 Were tilled like garden beds or a flower border,
 That on the Squire's estates reigned plenty and order.
 The gates, always wide open, gave welcome to all,
 Inviting those who pass them as guests to the Hall.

A young spark had just entered in carriage and pair
 And circling round the yard, turned towards the stair
 Of the porch. He alighted. Left alone at last
 The horses moved away, grazing as they passed.
 The mansion was deserted, for the door leading in
 Was fastened with a bar held by a wooden pin.
 Not bothering to look for servants, inquire or call
 The traveller undid the lock, dashed into the hall
 Eager to be back home. He wanted to greet it
 After long years of studies — now at last completed
 Spent in a distant city. His gaze dwells with joy
 On the venerable walls, good friends of the boy!
 He perceives the same objects, the same hangings, chairs,
 That witnessed the gay frolics of his infant years —
 Though not as big and lovely as they were of old!
 On the walls the same pictures he could still behold:
 Here General Kostiuszko with uplifted eyes,
 Had like a Cracow paysant, contemplates the skies
 And clasps a shining sword. Such was he at the time
 Of his oath before God to revenge the crime
 Against his country, or in the struggle perish. There,
 Dressed in Polish fashion, Reytan sits, in despair

*Mourning lost liberty. He points a stiletto
Against his breast, while Phaedo and the « Life of Cato »
Lie at hand. Jashinski next, handsome and morose,
With Korsak, his companion and true friend most close,
On the bulwarks of Praga stand among dead foes
And slash at Moscovites. A huge fire glows.
Even the musical clock in it's wooden case
He noticed near the alcove at the usual place,
And with childish delight smartly pulled the string
To hear Dombrowski's mazourka ancient tinkle ring.*

*Running about the house he searched for the chamber
Which was his years ago. He could well remember
Living there as a child. He bursts in — and retreats,
Looks around bewildered... his amazed eye meets
Signs of female presence. His uncle had no wife,
And an aunt in St. Petersburg spent most of her life...
This was not a housekeeper's room. Sheets of music, books
Flung on a pianoforte — and everything looks
Abandoned in great confusion. Charming disarray!
Old hands would be unable to make it so gay!
Here, just unhooked from a peg and ready to wear,
Lies a white muslin gown spread over a chair,
There, on the window-sill blooms in fragrant clusters,
Pots of brilliant geraniums, stocks, violets and asters.
The young man stepped to the window — new surprise!
The orchard once filled with nettles of enormous size
Had now a minute garden crossed with narrow paths,
Full of sweet smelling mint and of English grass.
A little wooden fence gracefully designed
Gleamed with ribbons of daisies which grew there entwined.
The plots had just been sprinkled, they looked fresh and trim,
Close by stood a watering can filled up to the brim,
But the mysterious gardner was nowhere in sight.
She went but a while ago. Disturbed by the slight
Touch of her exit the gate was still rocking...
Beneath, there was a foot-print free from shoe and stocking,
Upon the pure soft sand, more candid than snow,
Little foot-prints, distinct but faint, which obviously show
That tiny feet had left them in a swift light bound
Of someone, who quickly running barely touched the ground.*

*The traveller at the window stood lost and bemused,
 Breathing in the sweet scent which the blooms diffused.
 His face inclined as low as the violet plants
 He scanned the little paths with a curious glance
 To fasten it again on the minute traces,
 Wondering whose they could be and making wild guesses.
 By chance he raised his eyes. On the fence of wood
 Quite close, dressed all in white, a young maiden stood.
 Covering her slender person to the breast, the shift
 Left unveiled her shoulders and the swan-like lift
 Of her neck. A Lithuanian girl is allowed to wear
 Such clothes only in private, and would never dare
 Thus clad to risk the encounter of masculine eyes,
 So even unobserved, unconscious of spies,
 She pressed against her bosom her two folded arms,
 Helping the scanty garment to cover her charms.
 The hair, not allowed to flow loose, but twisted and bound
 Into knots, with curl papers wrapped tightly around,
 Adorned her head most quaintly, for catching the mellow
 Sunlight, it gleamed golden like a Saint's bright halo.
 The face could not be seen. She kept it directed
 Toward the distant fields as if she expected
 To find somebody there. All at once — she did,
 Clapped her hands, laughed aloud, and like a bird slid
 From her perch on the fence, fluttering to the flowers,
 And flashed across the garden over plots, through bowers,
 To a plank propped against the room from without,
 So that ere he could guess what she was about
 To do, in she streamed through the open window, bright,
 Sudden silent and soft, like a streak of moon-light.
 Humming she seized the frock, to the mirror tripped,
 Then she noticed the stranger. From her fingers slipped
 The gown, while amazement and sheer terror stripped
 Her cheeks of all colour. The young traveller's own
 Blushed rosy as a cloud touched by rising dawn.
 The modest youth dropped his eyes, trying to say how
 He was sorry, explain himself, but could only bow
 And step back. The young damsel gave a little scream,
 Faint, plaintive, like a child frightened by a dream...
 Aghast, he stole a glance — but the girl was gone.
 He left the room abashed. Once again alone*

*He could feel the thuds of his heart, loudly beating,
And wondered at the meaning of this bizarre meeting,
Whether it should amuse him or rather annoy,
Put to shame, or perhaps just fill him with joy.*

*Meanwhile, in the farmyard news had quickly spread
Of a new guest's arrival. Soon the horses led
With due care to the stables, got without delay,
As befit a decent household, their plenty of hay,
For the Judge, loath to follow a new-fangled mode,
Never let his friends' horses be sent up the road
To a Jewish inn-keeper. Yet, servants refrain
From rushing to give welcome, which means not disdain
Of good service. They await the Seneschal's pleasure
To attire himself, who now in fit measure
Makes the arrangements for supper. He remains
Host in the Squire's absence, greets and entertains,
As a distant relation and well trusted friend.
Advised of the visitor, he sneaks round the bend
Of the house to his quarters. A coarse homespun vest
Could not meet with such duties, so his Sunday best
He swiftly dons, kept handy, for it was quite plain
Since the morning, that to supper he would sit again
Among distinguished guests. At a single glance
From afar, the Seneschal recognized at once
The young traveller, and quickening his pace,
Opened both arms to clasp him in a long embrace.
Then started that strange discourse, hurried and confused,
Telling years of events, though few words are used,
And those muddled and brief. Mixed with queries, sighs,
Exclamations of wonder, new welcoming cries,
The story came in snatches, until satisfied,
His questions partly answered, the Seneschal tried
To speak in a more composed and moderate way,
Relating all the latest happenings of the day.*

*«Tis well my dear Thaddeus» — for such was the name
Bestowed upon the youth to honour the fame
Of Kostiuszko /as born while the war was fought/ —
«Tis well, that back home Providence has brought
You right now, when so many young ladies are here.*

*I suspect, that your uncle has already clear
Plans for a wedding feast. Take your choice. We are
In numerous company, come from near and far
To attend the Court Session, where between the Count
And us, the old feud should be settled. Upon this account
The Chamberlain is here, with his most respected
Lady and lovely daughters. The Count is expected.
The young men have arranged for a shooting party
To be held in the forest, while others, less hearty,
Together with the women, have preferred to stay
And admire the harvest. If you wish, we may
Direct our steps towards them and rejoin there
Your dear uncle, the Chamberlain and the ladies fair.»*

ADAM MICKIEWICZ

NOTES

All these poems, except for the passage from Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, have been taken from an anthology of Polish poetry which Burns Singer and I are preparing for publication. It will contain a hundred poems, covering five centuries (1450-1950) and showing the growth and range of a poetic tradition unknown in the West, but important for the study of European literature.

Polish poetry is unique among Slavonic literatures in its long and unbroken tradition. Rooted in the mediaeval Latin heritage, it succeeded from the very beginning in blending Western forms and ideas with native elements, and later, especially in the 17th century, other features were absorbed from a variety of local cultures, not only Polish but Lithuanian and Ruthenian. The proximity of the Islamic world added further contrasts. Hence the Polish fondness for baroque expression. Indeed, Poland in some ways resembles Spain more than any other country. Despite the differences of language and race, these two national traditions mark the boundaries of Europe in a dramatically similar way.

Now a few notes on the poets included in this selection.

JAN KOCHANOWSKI (1530-1584), educated in Italy, was the first great poetic personality. Among his works we find Horatian lyrics, hymns in the biblical vein and witty epigrammatic verse. But the most original is his cycle of laments, commemorating the death of his thirty-month-

old daughter. Here the deeply personal voice asserts itself against literary conventions and mythological or philosophical allusions, showing up their uselessness.

IGNACY KRASICKI (1735-1801), a dignitary of the Church and friend of the last king of Poland, achieved artistic precision in his satires and short abrupt fables. But there is also a lyrical poignancy in them when the subject, as in « Caged Birds », becomes an uneasy reminder of political reality for each generation of Polish readers.

JULIUS SLOWACKI (1809-1849) is with Adam Mickiewicz the embodiment of Polish Romanticism. They both had to live and die in exile. Slowacki's chief contribution to Polish literature lies in poetic drama, and he instinctively felt that his art, to be truly national, needed linking with the 17th century. As a lyrical poet he faced the dilemma of émigré freedom, and often expressed this in a manner free from patriotic rhetoric, e.g. in « Hymn » or « Give me a mile of land ». His last mystical poems show a strange affinity with the poetic diction of the Symbolists.

ADAM MICKIEWICZ (1798-1855) is better known outside Poland because of his epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* (1834), which has established a place for itself in world literature, at least in reference books. Before achieving his narrative fluency in verse, Mickiewicz experimented with a number of forms, using for instance the Romantic ballad and the Petrarchan sonnet. The cycle of « Crimean Sonnets » represents his best work in lyrical miniature, and is an exotic contrast to the colloquial persuasiveness of his *Pan Tadeusz*.

JERZY PETERKIEWICZ

ROBERT PENN WARREN

SHORT THOUGHTS FOR LONG NIGHTS

I. Nightmare of Mouse

*It was there, but I said it couldn't be true in daylight.
It was there, but I said it was only a trick of starlight.
It was there, but I said to believe it would take a fool,
And I wasn't, so didn't — till teeth crunched on my skull.*

II. Nightmare of Man

*I assembled, marshalled, my data, deployed them expertly.
My induction was perfect, as far as induction may be.
But the formula failed in the test tube, despite all my skill,
For I'd thought of the death of my mother, and wept; and
weep still.*

III. Human Nature

*Even if you scotch it,
You'd still better watch it.*

IV. Colloquy with Cockroach

*I know I smell. But everyone does, somewhat.
I smell this way only because I crawl down the drain.
I've no slightest idea how you got the smell you've got.
No, I haven't time now — it might take you too long to
explain.*

V. Little Boy on Voyage

*Little boy, little boy, standing on ship-shudder, wide eyes
staring
At unease of ocean at sunset, and the distance long —
You've stared, little boy, at gray distance past hoping or
despairing,
So come in for supper and sleep now; they, too, will help you
grow strong.*

VI. Obsession

*Dawn draws on slow when dawn brings only dawn —
Only slow milk-wash on window, star paling, first wind-stir,
Sweat cold now on pillow before the alarm's burr,
And the old thought for the new day as day draws on.*

VII. A Long Spoon

*If afraid of water
Don't go to bed with the mermaid's daughter.*

VIII. Joy

*If you've never had it, discussion is perfectly fruitless,
And if you have, you can tell nobody about it.
To explain silence, you scarcely try to shout it.
Let the flute and drum be still, the trumpet toot-less.*

IX. Theology

*The old ape is blind — wipe the poor eyes with lace;
The hog is sick — catch his froth in a silver cup;
There is nameless blood on the sidewalk — kiss the place:
For if pain is not pleasing to God, what holds stars up?*

X. Cricket, on Kitchen Floor, Enters History

*History, shaped like white hen,
Walked in at kitchen door.
Beak clicked once on stone floor.
Out door walked hen then;
But will, no doubt, come again.*

XI. Little Boy and General Principle

*Don't cry, little boy, you see it is only natural
That little red trucks will break, whether plastic or tin,
And some other things, too. It's a general principle
That you'll have to learn soon, so you might, I guess, now
begin.*

XII. Grasshopper Tries to Break Solipsism

*Sing summer, summer, sing summer summerlong—
For God is light, oh I love Him, love is my song.
I sing, for I must, for God, if I didn't, would weep,
And over all things, all night, His despair, like ice, creep.*

NURSERY RHYME: WHY ARE YOUR EYES
AS BIG AS SAUCERS?

*« Why are your eyes as big as saucers — big as saucers? »
I said to the man in the gray flannel suit.
And he said: « I see facts that I can't refute —
Winners and losers,*

*Pickers and choosers,
Takers, refusers,
Users, abusers,
And my poor head, it spins, it spins like a top,
It spins and spins and it will not stop. »
Thus said the young man I happened to meet
Wearing his new gray flannel suit down the sunlit street.*

« Why do you shake like wind in the willows — wind in the willows? »

*I said to the man with the black knit tie.
And he said; « I see things before my eye —
Jolly good fellows,
Glad-handers of hellos,
Fat wind-bags and bellows,
Plumpers of pillows,
And God's sweet air is dust on my tongue,
For a man can't stand such things very long. »
Thus said the young man I happened to meet
Wearing gray flannel suit and black knit tie down the sunlit street.*

« Why is your face flour-white as a miller's — white as a miller's? »

*I said the man in the Brooks Brothers' shirt.
And he said: « I see things that can't help but hurt —
Snitchers and squealers,
Healers and killers,
Pickers and stealers,
Ticklers and feelers,
And I go to prepare a place for you,
For this location will never do. »
Said the nice young man I happened to meet
Wearing gray flannel suit, knit tie, and Brooks Brothers shirt
down the street.*

EQUINOX ON MEDITERRANEAN BEACH

*Sail-bellyer, exciter of boys, come bang
To smithereens doors, and see if I give a hang,*

*For I am sick of summer and the insane glitter
Of sea sun-bit, and wavelets that bicker and titter,*

*And the fat girls who hang out brown breasts like fruit over-
ripe,
And the thin ones drooped pale in rock-shadow, goose-pimpled
as tripe,*

*And the young men who pose on the headlands like ads for
Jantzen,
And the old who would do so much better to keep proper
pants on,*

*And all latin faeces one finds, like jewels, in the sand,
And the stare of the small, sweet octopus fondling your hand.*

*Come howl like a prophet the season's righteous anger,
And knock down our idols with crash, bang, or clangor,*

*Come blow the cat's fur sideways, make dogs bark,
Blow the hen's tail feathers forward past the pink mark,*

*Snatch the laundry off the line, like youth, away,
Blow plastered hair off bald spot, lift toupee.*

*Come blow old women' skirts, bring Truth to light,
Though at their age morn's all the same as night.*

*Kick up the bay now, make a mess of it,
Fling spume on our sinful faces, like God's spit,*

*For now's the time pleasures, like peaches, get rotten, not riper,
And summer is over, and time we must pay the piper,*

*And be glad to do it, for man's not made for much pleasure,
Or even for joy, unless cut down to his measure.*

*Come swirl old picnic papers to very sky-height,
That the gulls will gabble in fury at breach of their air-right.*

*Come kick the garbage pail, and scatter garbage,
Let cat flee forth with fish-head, housewife rage,*

*For pain and pleasure balance in God's year —
Though whose is which is not your problem here,*

*Or perhaps not even God's. So bang, wind, batter,
While human hearts do the book-keeping in this matter.*

ROBERT LOWELL

MY LAST AFTERNOON WITH UNCLE DEVEREUX WINSLOW

1922: the stone porch of my Grandfather's summer house

I

*« I won't go with you. I want to stay with Granpa! »
That's how I threw cold water
on my Mother and Father's
watery martini pipe-dreams at Sunday dinner.
...Fontainebleau, Mattapoisett, Vancouver...
Nowhere was anywhere after a summer
at my Grandfather's farm.
Diamond-pointed, athirst and Norman,
its alley of poplars
paraded from Grandmother's rose garden
to a scarey stand of virgin pine,
scrub, and paths forever pioneering.*

*One afternoon in 1922,
I sat on the stone porch, looking through
screens as black-grained as drifting coal.
Tockytock, tockytock:
clumped our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo clock,
slung with bloody, wooden game.
Our farmer was cementing a root-house under the hill.
One of my hands was cool on a pile*

*of black earth, the other warm
 on a pile of lime. All about me
 were the works of my Grandfather's hands:
 snap-shots of his Liberty Bell silver mine;
 his high school at Stukkert am Neckar;
 stogie-brown beams; fools'-gold nuggets;
 octagonal red tiles,
 sweaty with a secret dank, crummy with ant-stale;
 a Rocky Mountain chaise longue,
 its legs, shellacked saplings.
 A pastel-pale Huckleberry Finn
 fished with a broom straw in a basin
 hollowed out of a millstone.
 Like my Grandfather, the decor
 was manly, comfortable,
 overbearing, disproportioned.*

What were those sunflowers? Pumpkins floating shoulder-high?

*They were Sadie and Nellie
 bearing pitchers of ice-tea,
 oranges, lemons, mint, and peppermints,
 and the jug of shandygaff,
 which Granpa made by blending, half and half,
 yeasty, wheezing home-made sarsaparilla with beer.
 The farm, entitled Char-de-sa
 in the Social Register,
 was named for my Grandfather's children:
 Charlotte, Devereux, and Sarah.
 No one had died there in my lifetime...
 Only Cinder, our Scottie puppy
 paralysed from gobbling toads.
 I sat mixing black earth and lime.*

II

*I was five and a half.
 My formal pearl gray shorts
 had been worn for three minutes.*

My perfection was the Olympian
poise of my models in the imperishable autumn
display windows
of Rogers Peet's boys' store below the State House
in Boston. Distorting drops of water
pinpricked my face in the basin's mirror.
I was a stuffed toucan
with a bibulous, multicolored beak.

III

Up in the air,
by the sunset window in the billiards-room,
my Great Aunt Sarah
was learning the Overture to the Flying Dutchman,
and thundered on the keyboard of her dummy piano.
With gauze skirts like a boudoir table,
accordion-like, yet soundless,
it had been bought to spare the nerves
of my Grandmother Winslow,
tone-deaf, quick as a cricket —
now grouching through a paper-bound Zola, and saying:
« Why does Sally thump forever
on a toy no one can hear? »

Forty years earlier,
twenty, auburn-headed, a virtuoso
swept over by Liszt,
Aunt Sarah, the Winslows' only « genius, »
had lifted her archaic Athenian nose,
and jilted an Astor.
Each morning she had practiced
on the grand piano at Symphony Hall,
deathlike in the off-season summer —
its naked Greek statues draped with purple
like the saints during Holy Week...
On the concert day, Miss Winslow could not appear.

*Now her investments were made by her Brother.
 Her career
 was a danger-signal for the nieces.
 High above us,
 Aunt Sarah lifted a hand
 from the dead keys of the dummy piano,
 and declaimed grandly:
 « Barbarism lies behind me;
 mannerism is ahead. »*

V

*I picked with a clean finger nail at the blue anchor
 on my sailor blouse washed white as a spinnaker.
 What in the world was I wishing?
 ...A sail-colored horse browsing in the bullrushes...
 A fluff of the west wind puffing
 my blouse, kiting me over our seven chimneys,
 troubling the waters...
 As small as sapphires were the ponds: Quittacus, Snippituit,
 and Assawompset, halved by « the Island, »
 where my Uncle's duck blind
 floated in a barrage of smoke-clouds.
 Double-barrelled shotguns
 stuck out like bundles of baby crow-bars.
 A single sculler in a camouflaged kayak
 was quacking to the decoys...*

*At the cabin between the waters,
 the nearest windows were already boarded.
 Uncle Devereux was closing camp for the winter.
 As if posed for « the engagement photograph, »
 he was wearing his severe
 war-uniform of a volunteer Canadian officer.
 Daylight from the doorway riddled his student posters,
 tacked helter-skelter on the walls as raw as a board-walk.
 Mr. Punch, a water-melon in hockey tights,
 was tossing off a decanter of Scotch.
 La Belle France in a red, white and blue toga*

was accepting the arm of her « protector, »
 the ingenu and porcine Edward VII.
 The pre-war music hall belles
 had goose necks, glorious signatures, beauty-moles,
 and coils of hair like rooster tails.
 The finest poster was two or three young men in khaki kilts
 being bushwhacked on the veldt —
 They were almost life-size...

My Uncle was dying at twenty-nine.
 « You are behaving like children, »
 said my Grandfather,
 when my Uncle and Aunt left their three baby daughters,
 and sailed for Europe on a second honeymoon...
 I cowered in terror,
 I wasn't a child at all —
 unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina
 in the Golden House of Nero...
 Near me was the white measuring-door
 my Grandfather had pencilled with my Uncle's heights.
 In 1911, he had stopped growing at just six feet.
 While I sat on the tiles,
 and dug at the anchor on my sailor blouse,
 Uncle Devereux stood behind me.
 He was as brushed as Bayard, our riding horse.
 His face was putty.
 His blue coat and white trousers
 grew sharper and straighter.
 His coat was a blue jay's tail,
 his trousers were solid cream from the top of the bottle.
 He was animated, hierarchical,
 like a ginger-snap man in a clothes-press.
 He was dying of the incurable Hodgkin's disease...
 My hands were warm, then cool, on the piles
 of earth and lime,
 a black pile and a white pile...
 Come winter,
 Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color.

KATHERINE GARRISON CHAPIN

POEMS AT NINFA

*Standing breast-high in asphodel among rushes
To what could I lift my eyes that was not a dream?
All day the petals drifted on the stream,
The castle clung to a rocky ledge of mountain.*

*Wherever I walked a foot had been before me,
There were voices under the spring, in the sacred grove.
I heard the heavy step of the cypress move
In the night, and without a wind in its branches.*

*The hidden nightingales were pouring out their notes
Like water, and the moon laid a silver sword
Across my sleep. I could not cry aloud,
To break the bright endurance of this spell.*

*

*How like a maiden is the tall tower
Poised, with a glance lifted in air.
About her thighs a vine falls as a garment,
Sun gleams on crenellated turrets,
As on a bright shape of hair.*

*Once raised in strength, above the olives,
Alone, under a classic hill,*

*Proud fortress against surge of armies.
Now rooks fly, crying through the twilight
When sounds of earth are still.*

*From this height banners fluttered seaward,
Here moved pomp, majesty came near.
The bells in seven spires called to penance
Under dim altars; now walls are scattered,
There is no longer glory or fear.*

*You stand alone, O Tower, a maiden,
In beauty slowly fading and dry;
Reflected only in a pale lake,
But never captured, never rocked
By a strong wind from a new sky.*

*

*The walls are old,
The stream is fresh,
Coming through
With a silver rush.*

*By a worn bridge
Where the river passes,
Petals fall lightly
From virgin roses.*

*Eternal water!
The pagan spring
Flows under the nave
Where church bells rang.*

*Limpid and clear,
A deep pool now...
The meaning is old,
The water is new.*

*

*Before the robber baron's wall,
Forbidding moat, the winding stair,
By darkened dungeon keep she moves
As delicate as air,*

*Touching the stones with feet that spurn
To crush the Primavera's grass.
The noisy-footed children run
To see the lady pass.*

*Where out of mist and crystal dew
And myrtle flowers was she made?
Tall as a poplar in the wood
No wind has disarrayed.*

*Slowly she portions out a dole,
Gently, with deprecating air.
The men and women stand apart,
The silent children stare.*

*They know her shield above the font,
Her carven throat lifts from the tomb,
She bears a weight of stone and blood,
Of barren hearth and womb.*

THE CHINESE DEER

*Through a colorless landscape on the last day of the year
We walked in the Zoo. The stream was a frozen line
Between black trees. Your hand slipped from mine
As you skipped down the path or hung on the iron
Fences, watching animals, who sniffed
At the wind for a taste of cold, as if it blew
From the steppes or the ragged Himalyas.
Hunched bison and goat ignored your questioning eyes,
Indifferent even to sparrows, pecking among grains
Or buzzards circling in the heavy sky.*

*Their worlds were too far away to be real;
But the Old Year ready to slide down, you said,
And the New Year to rise,
Made some picture within your head
As clear as your faith had been in the warning sound
Of Christmas hoofs on the roof in the night
And the bright transformations seen the next morning.*

*Over the hill we came to the Chinese Deer;
«...Extinct in the wild several centuries before
The Christian era,» I read, «but a herd was pastured
In the Imperial Hunting Park of the Summer Palace
South of Peiping...»
Here time stopped in its downward swing,
While you stood and watched the small crouched heads,
Soft ears under stubbled horns, and gentle faces.
You could not know the legendary places
Where long ago they scampered and fed,
Or, as symbols of wealth and happiness,
They walked serenely across painted scrolls,
Companion to steep-browed Immortals.*

*In chill wind where a few snowflakes floated
This silken past, honored and celebrated
With fireworks and gongs, the First Month Festival
Took shape of visual memory, and I stood
Like an old Chinese poet beside a stream,
Whose brush had written many songs,
Lost now down the valley where leaves swirled
Skeleton thin and sere...
Till your red-mittened hand
Pulled me sharply forward into the rising year.*

RETURN

*Through mown grass of evening
Salt-dry and spare
I return to my own living.
The low rounded hills*

*Fold and unfold a shore
Where goddess never arose
In her fluted shell above the foam's breaking.*

*From no hidden cave
Darkened with vows,
Speaks promise or prophecy;
Wings over the wave
Carry no omen cry;
A quail pipes in the pines,
And only a wandering hawk circles the grove.*

*Far off the Sicilian shore
Where timeless sand
Beached painted prow and oar;
Wide temples stand
Latticed with gem sea;
Archaic splendor
Among bright fields has left its signature.*

*Here on springing earth,
Swept by new wind,
Skies clear of wrath,
Rhythmic murmur of sea,
Unweighted by dream or myth
Things lost or to find,
I walk a fresh path deep into the lonely mind.*

MAN BETWEEN TWO LOVES

*A man between two loves,
Though one remote in time,
Shall never be alone,
And ever while he lives
His pulse will not be tame
Before the beat of one.*

*He stands where time divides
Facing the rising sun,
And hails the coming day;
The memory that recedes
Like wisp of cloud is gone
But dulls his edge of joy.*

*Another love who rises
On the wave's new crest,
With her darker curl
Obliterates the tresses,
The golden tresses lost
Beneath the angry swell.*

*And where she sets her foot
In lovely innocence
She treads a trampled sand.
Here once a blade was hot,
And here love's circumstance
Came to a bitter end.*

*The winding clock of time
Runs counter to the man
Who moves between two loves,
Treading a double theme.
He cannot cleave to one
Forever while he lives.*

JEAN GARRIGUE

ADDRESS FROM FIRENZE

*For you who would remember plumes, processions,
Mantles of gold brocade,
Suits of silver brocade covered with pearls,
White and carnation-colored feathers clasped by a diamond,
Harness of Spanish bays studded with precious stones
Drawing Her Majesty's calèche
Nodding with jasmine blossoms and olive — peace and love!
Even the wheels gilded —*

*As for her too 'gauche for love
Virtuous in youth through weakmindedness'
Sailing to France with purple sails
The Pope in the second of the gilded fleet
Under a canopy of cloth of gold
Red satin stretched on the deck —*

*Return, if you can, to the setting
Of a half of the world's portion of fame
Of such tranquil gardens set out, walled in,
Dreaming with trees in pots
And the spear-glittering blades of the palm
Look to those jocund heirs
Of the young morning of time
Not much more than the compass having been recently in-
vented,
Take their pleasure
With elegance pomp and measure*

Return, if you can, to the setting,
 Comprehend through love, even envy, the word,
 Try to get by a glance out of the tail of the eye
 Into the scene,
 Somebody visibly feeding a cat at the Last Supper
 Those yellow dimensions of space where the borders
 Are woven with gay specimens of fish
 And bold stags, a very forest in their foreheads,
 And say

When they in that young morning of time, wild
 With the excitement of discovery,
 The superb effort of which to make it their own
 They would graft the very olive and vine
 Of that civilization of the temple and laurel
 Onto their own,
 By dance measures, by a dressing in leaves,
 By the scarlet and striped bowmen,
 Having come into the ravished quietness
 Of those statues unearthed from somebody's garden,
 The Laocoon from the House of Nero,
 Prodigious with the vitality
 Of those who have found their way in,
 Heroic before the wonder
 Of the created thing,
 Proportion restored, and by that
 The art to find their own measurement,
 Their own bridging arches and arches of triumph,
 And further say —
 What is there to say
 Of the clear finished forms
 And an old rowboat in the river,
 An old rowboat slopped full of water
 By the sharp-cut piers and the dolphins —
 What is there to say except
 When that clear morning of time went
 With its combination of a barbarian freshness
 And a rich taste for design, color,
 Rich innocent stillness of figures,
 Went for us too, an 'innocence',

*Went what cannot come again
By the fields of full flowering grain*

*Whose Love Triumphant riding past such fields
(Drawn by a unicorn)*

*Exerts such light upgathered
Of the Luminous Morning*

It draws us on as if it cast gold rays

Like those the angel casts before the Virgin,

Commanding, though he kneels, the burden in,

Her, intacta, to grow big,

A girl great with god!

there in the fading fresco

Of the far green plain stretching endless on

Back of the white-plated Virgin and her finished creation,

The child, before which cow and donkey bow

And the three kings with onyx trappings,

There on that plain staged with a hundred trees or more,

Blue silhouette of tower wound round by stairs,

Green bushes on erect poles,

Miniature landscape of fertility

Blessed when she came and burdened when she went —

Say that there on a dour day when the stone is brutto,

Brutishly slaps up the feet with cold — tile and marble

And pietra dura — those wreaths and gaudy flowers

*All by the finished touch of artisan scholars wild on colored
stone*

*And wild to piece a trumpet of flowers out of that hard bright
stone*

That there on a dour day in a city of museums

Rife with the square-set stones of history

Rife with the declensions of a magnanimity —

For you have seen the pomp of the over-decorated,

Rock crystal gravy boats in the shape of large-winged birds

*That only a geniused goldsmith by a purity of daring could
make*

Not of the air of the freak show,

And with the virtuosity gone out of hand

*So that you get an excess of heaviness, dense materiality,
Wearying because of a bravura without spiritual tension —
Fretted columns to hold a martyr's bones —*

*For you who would remember plumes, processions,
What have you concluded now
Thinking of the youth of the soul?*

*O contrariety at the center! —
That it is a mute violence
To the soul of things time-wrenched
To have dialog with its shadows
Upon the past,
Upon that rare morning of time
When the flower had no sooner reached its peak
And prodigious pitch than decline set in —*

*And the Horse, the Horse of da Vinci,
That model in plaster set up in a square
For the occasion of a royal wedding five years before
With which for seventeen years he had been occupied
And of which, ten years before he had begun his work
There had been numerous designs and plans
Rumors of which had reached him, that drew him to Milan
Picked as a target by bowmen,
Gascon bowmen, according to Vasari,
Riddling the Horse till it fell
While Il Moro beating the drum
Against his own best ambitions
Brought down the 'logical despotism'
Of invasion upon invasion —*

*For you who would remember plumes, processions,
The linked arms of dance,
The crowned urn, the shield and the casque,
What are you to do before all
Perdition has ruined and stolen away?
Mourn with the strife of the music of rivers
For that early touched world afire
With the unspent joy of the idea of the real
That more clear than the real gave the real its power
Gone like the blaze of a rare star?*

Grand elation of the beautiful!
As difficult to hunt stags by moonlight
As turning from you to survive
The undersongs of your arrogant shadows
The touch through the eyes

To walk in your dazzle against
The disrelations of time
To shatter the eye with time's emblems
Its profusion of emblems for
The magnificent claim to the one

Or then to go down to the river
To the old rowboat slopped full of water,
Ancient bed of the new waters
Of the old river.

And strew
The perishing, never perishing flower on the river,
Our defiant libation.

DAPHNE ATHAS

THE WAY TO FIND HESTIA

There is a pattern and a reason in houses which you forget if you live in one. If you live in a dump, you know.

Just imagine that you are sitting in a straight chair like Van Gogh's and that you are leaning back against the wall, whitewashed or board, I don't care. You are reading by the light of a kerosene lamp. You are warm enough. Suddenly over your head you hear a rustle and you see a monstrous face coming toward you out of an aperture in the ceiling, descending upon you straight down the wall which leads to your neck. It is propelled by four legs which are like the legs of ancient bathtubs. Leading from its body is along, prehistoric tail, coiled like cable wire and shining dully in the light of the kerosene lamp.

A rat is menacing because it leads with its nose. It is surreptitious because it has the ability to creep slowly, yet it moves in fits and starts. It is filled with fear. It darts to attack or to flee quicker than lightning. Its heart beats against its cold fur. Its eyes seem beadily blind. Its face contains a vile knowledge, an illusion behind a mask of suspense. It harbors lice, fleas and disease. Its paws tread garbage and filth as a delight. Field rat, wharf rat, or garbage rat, the rat is one of those border tribes, the scavenger. But people are of the tribe which provide the scavenge. Rats, like rain, have been controlled as an operating menace. But I tell you there is something splendid in the appreciation of a rat, for he is Hestia's enemy.

Our first house was an elegant white-clapboarded mansion with green blinds like lips opening onto the harbor of the North Shore of Massachusetts. It was a neat, sturdy, handsome and fashionable. Millionaires' estates sprawled over the wooded headland all the way to the lighthouse. But ours was not a fake Tudor, not Norman, not Italian or labyrinthine. It had no pergolas, no piazzas, no swimming pool, no games room. It had twenty-four rooms under its colonial eaves and over a hundred curtains to be washed during the depression by my mother alone. It had a great willow tree sweeping the summer road. It had grown-up acres which we called « The Field. » It had Sweet William and some exotic Japanese lantern plant. It had a special cedar tree which I never liked and a lot of pestilential poplars which I climbed to the top of and fell to the ground with when my father cut them down. It had breezes from both the ocean and the harbor, for it was set by three waters in the middle of this headland called The Point, its face toward the harbor, its rear skirted by a three mile pond beyond which lay the Atlantic Ocean. Out of my window you could see Minot's light on a clear evening and the Portland steamer heading its weekly way to Maine. Out of the dining room window you could see Rafe's Chasm, Ten Pound Island, and the place where the Hesperus was wrecked. Seagulls cried around us making a lonely and beautiful sound. The moon rose over the Atlantic, a shattering glister on choppy waves. The leaves of the silver poplar sighed, sang, twistered and twinkled in the sun. The wind sang eternally through long summer grasses. The milk-weed when its branch was broken wept tears of milk, and they were sticky under our fingers. Sudden lightning storms broke summer. Blizzards piled ten foot snow-drifts in winter under which we made polar Thesian labyrinths with no beast to conquer.

In the cold and snowless days we put our skates on in the house and walked five steps to the pond to skate. When it was windy, we held up burlap bags between us and sailed at fifty-miles an hour on our skates. We stole rides on people's ice boats and in great winds almost tipped them over. We explored the summer mansions in the dead of winter, climbing rooftops, discovering rusty hinges, climbed through the

rooted summer sills to find left-over cheese-cracker crumbs in empty kitchens, and white-sheathed biers of furniture in the salons. Our mother had a policeman's whistle and when we heard it from miles away, we knew that it was time to go home for dinner. We had a goat and we had a lamb which followed us upon the beach. We saved a baby owl in a summer storm. In summer we put on our bathing suits in the house and walked the ten steps it took to go swimming. We knew every rock and every pool for miles around and we named them erudite names. And when we went to sleep we could hear the wind around the eaves and the sound of Chopin and Brahms floating up from the front room where our mother was playing the grand piano.

Now all of this would have been a useless paradise if it had not been contained under strange conditions. All the time we lived in this paradise, we were losing it. The bank did not believe we would never pay off the mortgage even though four businessmen who owned summer houses on Eastern Point had jumped out of skyscraper windows in Manhattan. So we were allowed to stay, in hope. Five years in hope. We knew, as children knew, but we did not know. For how can you know at the age of eight what one house is like if you live in the only house you know?

We knew only one thing, that we lived in our house and at the same time we had to make money.

We had two schemes for making money out of which the four of us made a hundred dollars a season. The first was picking pond-lilies and selling them to summer people in town. Every morning we went out in our boat. We got to know every pond-lily patch. We got to spot every pond-lily that was white, and every pond-lily that was brown or had been chewed by a muskrat. We picked them early while they were still sleeping, when their petals had not yet opened. Then we stationed ourselves on three street-corners in town. And the petals opened. And people bought. There were the suckers, the good, and the crumbs, depending on how they acted toward you. The other scheme we had for making money was this: we had eight English bells, manufactured in Whitechapel, which were rung by novice bell-ringers before they graduated onto the big bells in church steeples where

they rang out changes. For knowledge of this subject read Dorothy Sayers: *The Nine Taylors*. It was supposed to be an ancient art. We got ourselves engagements in all the summer hotels, and instead of string orchestras the summer people had us and our bells to listen to. Do you Ken John Peel, Oranges and Lemons. Even straight changes. With harmony. I don't know if the people loved the bells, or if they just loved the idea of children ringing them.

The bank finally gave upon us.

Moving down from paradise was an earthly adventure.

There was a succession of houses. They were not like Thalassia. We now had neighbors instead of acres. We had backyards instead of the ocean.

The less and the more money you have, the closer to nature you become. A strange thing was happening. By an obverse process we were coming nearer and nearer to the conception of a house. We got to the point of no money where people consider bread, caves and climate. That is when Hestia becomes a goddess.

We went, like birds, to the South.

In the South there are usually two towns, the white town and the colored town. These towns defy their descriptions, because the white town's houses are always painted in colors, and the colored town's houses are always never painted at all, and are colored by the weather which is no color at all, just weather color.

It is in the colored town we found the House. It was separated from the colored town because it had a lot of four acres. It stood upon a knoll under three butternut trees and an oak. It was just beyond the old laundry plant where they had put up the new power plant for the town. (We pretended this was a magnificent swimming pool with Versailles fountains). It was on a pale dirt road hung over and suffused with the heavy perfume of thick-clustered honeysuckles. The macadam road ended here and the colored town began. A one line railroad track crossed the road. Every noon a freight train heaved its dusty way from Carrboro to dump a load of coal at the power-plant. Mrs Snipes (We called her Lucretia Pile for some unknown reason), a gargantuan, fat-flapping

colored lady, ran a one-room store right at the edge of the tracks. She sold pinto beans.

Sweat is a stunning reality. So is smoke. So are freight trains. Now no more singing grasses, no more symphonic waves, no more oceans, no more Chopin floating tenderly in a New England evening. Nothing was far away ever again.

Clap your hands once in a confined place.

This house was so broken, so poor, so grown-up with weeds, so battered and so weathered that it was marvellous. Let me describe it to you. It sat on the knoll, as I say, under these stunning green lascivious trees, looking over the trench-mouth red of eroded Carolina earth and over the shambles of nigger rooves across the honeysuckled dirt. It had one unused well with rotten water due to a puppy falling down and drowning in it. The well was canopied by four rotten wood posts and a slatternly roof. It had an outside cabin which was in olden times a kitchen. It had a shed which we called a garage. It had a rotten old automobile which had sat down and not only died but decayed in the yard. It had a barn, bleached and bony. The barn was filled with hay. But not only did it have hay, it also had a dust-filled pump organ in it, which we played *Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes* on. The sublime ecclesiastical sound penetrated through the hot motionless air, over nigger dogs' barking, over the shrieks of laughter from the shacks and made the colored people hold their hands together and love the Lord.

We were always a Dot It Yourself family before that ever came into vogue. There were two things which we decided to do ourselves before we moved in, and one thing we decided never to do after we moved in. The first was that my father put in a bathtub plus a toilet plus water-pipes. The second was that my father drew up the lease for the house himself. We paid eighteen dollars rent a month. It was signed by all parties. However, he did not have it notarized by a justice of the peace, because he did not want to spend the two dollars on it probably. This was bad. You will see what it led to. The thing which we decided to never do ourselves was to brush the yard with those broom grass sticks which all southerners who have dirt yards do. We considered this the epitome of trash.

Some people believe that certain attitudes dictate the type of houses people live in. But I believe that the type of houses people live in do the dictating. Athalattia (which means House Away from the Sea) began to dictate. It said to us: « You will not let anybody else do that which you can do. » On the other hand, it also said: « You will not attempt to patch me, fix me, or improve me, because I am manifest and proud in my putridity. I am even worse than those houses which mill-workers live in Carrobor. I have excellent hubris. I am a historic house. I am the first house ever built in this town. I existed before the Civil War, and I never was a mansion. I was the poor house of a poor dirt farmer of the Piedmont who went away to fight against you, and lost. My owner was not only trash, he was a cuckold. His wife began running around with some other man. I contain the bullet hold where my master missed the lover as he was shaving over the kitchen sink, and hit me. I have an old tin roof upon which no cats run, only squirrels and chipmunks. I dictate the season of the year when the huts fall down upon my tin roof. They report like pistol shot. My porch is about to fall, nor shall it be mended. For it shall fall when it wants to fall, nor shall it be helped or hindered by you. For, you occupants, you will realize that you use me when I have been unused, you shiver in me through my holes, you laugh at my rottenness, you swelter in my lack of insulation, yet you do not own me. You merely rent me. And renting me, I stand or fall by my age and my pride. »

We did not argue with it. Who were we to put even fifty cents into such a house with such rottenness and such pride? Of course we were very proud of its pride. What other attitude was there to take?

Now there was one upstairs room which was to be the bedroom of our mother. Unfortunately it had no stairs to it. It was an excellent cozy large room with slanting walls from the heap to the roof. If it was to be her bedroom, there had to be some way that she could get into it other than being hauled up in a basket like Socrates to heaven in Euripides. This room had one window right next to the brick chimney which was old, toppling, and stuck together with mud. My father made a kind of step-ladder with wood he got from

pulling the floor out of the shed. He propped this ladder against the chimney and nailed it into the rotten clapboards of the house. My mother weighed 193 pounds. At night her exit to bed was a mass, a litany, and an operation. We would all go outdoors with her and stand in the dirt at the bottom of the chimney. She would say her first goodnight. Then she would begin the ascent. The ladder heaved abominably and groaned. We would hold our breaths. As she neared the top our fists curled like monkey paws, vicariously. She would heave herself the final heave over the window sill and into the room. A few stones from the chimney always shook loose and dropped. We waited. We waited until a light appeared from that fathomless hole of darkness into which she had disappeared. Then her head would come out the window again and say, full of the pride of accomplishment: « Good night. » « Goodnight, » we all echoed. And the window was closed. One by one we traipsed back into the house for the night.

Heating was an interesting problem. There were two excellent fireplaces in the house, one in the room we called the living room which was buttressed by Mother's Chimney and the Front Porch, and the other in the room we used as the dining room. The dining room fireplace was huge because the mud bricks were always dropping like avalanches from the inside of the chimney. No matter how many bricks fell (we shovelled them out and threw them away) it always drew. We did not, at this time, like so many trashy folks do, insert the stove pipe out through a window pane. We only resorted to that a year later when we decided that to have enough heat we must use both a stove and the fireplace. We spent most of our life that year leaning against the four sides of an oil stove which was about as warm as a dog's nose. We were always identifiable in the moves because of our persistent smell of kerosene. It was for this reason, we believe, that none of us were ever rushed by any sororities.

When we had parties we invited the college students over. We opened up the icy front room. We lit a huge fire in the fire-place, and we all sat around and drank cocoa. Millions used to come to these parties. My father treated the place like an esoteric Greek café. He needled and pruned people,

forcing them to give their opinions of Leibnitz, Socrates, John Dewey, Catholicism, goats, the British government, capitalism, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, donkeys, nuns, or Lessing's aesthetic principles based on his study of the Laocoon. The house not only had us in it most of the time, but it harbored continual students and border cases. One of these meetings inspired Miss Rowena Crook at the age of 71 to recontinue her PhD thesis on the Algebraic Interpretation of Leonardo da Vinci. She was an ancient Alabama thing of aristocratic family who had wended her way to the town and who had been diminished to selling fish and nuts to negroes in an abandoned gas station on the highway between Carrboro and the town. She not only finished the thesis, but she wrote it in iambic pentameter and submitted it to a publisher who wrote back that it read very smoothly but it didn't make sense. If you don't believe me, ask anyone in town. She was later raped and murdered at New Hope Chapel by an unknown person. The Winston-Salem paper headline: « 72 year old coed Raped and Murdered. » At first Mr. Silver, owner of the Silver Lumber Yards, was suspected because it was discovered that there were scratches on his face and a string of cheap pearls was found in his ashcan.

Before she was murdered, Miss Crook used to come over to listen to the war news on our radio. Whenever she listened to the news, her mouth began to come apart. In the middle of broadcasts it was as wide as a barn door with broken hinges. One day we were having our noon meal and Mother said innocently: « There is a terrible draft in here. » My sister began to laugh and pointed secretly behind the table to Miss Crook's mouth. My father ordered her to leave the room.

But we could not get rid of the drafts no matter what we did. We stuffed a few window panes and sills with rags from outgrown dresses. Then we bought a five dollar wood-stove. This began the period of the dissolution of the barn. The barn was a tempting heap of sun-bleached, knotted rotten pine boards. Do you think we spent any money to buy cords of wood? The barn, like the house was foundationless. We began at the ground where the wood hung only by rusty rotten nails. Every day we would rip off one or two of the boards. We worked upward until a ragged hole was hollowed out of the

west side. We stuffed that five dollar wood stove so full that it bulged. And then we lit it. It cracked, sputtered and burned in insane ecstasy. Then it began to blush with shame for its greed. It began to vibrate and shiver with heat. We called it the red hot pot. At a certain point in its heat we knew not to put any more wood in. People that came to the house would stare at it in horrible apprehension, their eyes enlarged, and their hearts in their mouths. But after a few visits they came to know that we were its masters, and that we would no more allow that stove to explode and catch the house and burn up all our worldly goods than we would let ourselves explode. After four visits they did not even pay any attention to it, other than to shade their faces from the hot glare.

But it was only at these special occasions that we luxuriated in fierce heat. Mostly we lived in the dining room. We did our lessons, fought, argued, mimicked, Mother sewed, and our father shaved. We ate pinto beans all the time. Mother kept an old fireless cooker pot (so huge that stretching your arm into it, your fingers would not reach the bottom) full of a mixture of pinto beans and corn which we bought cheap from Mrs. Lucretia Pile. One pot would last one week and four days, counting one meal a day of the stuff. I would like to say that we hated it, but the truth was, it was good.

One winter we had a terrific snow. It made the southern town look like O little town of Bethlehem on Christmas cards. We were elated. But some of the prophecies of the house began to come true.

We were sitting in the dining room. My sister was aping how a certain teacher at school walked. Suddenly there was a horrible crash. It was one of those inexplicable phenomena that makes the mind flash: « End of the world, » or « Hydrogen Bomb! » The room shook wildly, yet walls, pictures, even the steel desk remained intact. We did not move. We sat quiet, like animals, our laughter and our motion frozen. Suddenly Mother dared ask:

« What is it? »

We breathed.

My sister got up and took a step.

My brother walked softly and cautiously to the window. The porch was in a shambles on the ground. Ripped from

the side of the house, nails squawked awry, broken timber beams, the floor completely caved in, the two supporting posts broke rotten, scrabbled husks of foul wood mixed with dirty snow, all lay in a heap spread out in the snow. Shingles had flown as far away as four feet. The place where the porch had been nailed against the wall showed a delicate pale yellow from some ancient paint upon the naked clapboards. It was the load of snow that had done it.

We threw up our hands. We shouted 'Hooray.' We started to laugh. For three whole days we laughed.

From then on, we began burning up the porch in the five-dollar wood stove, instead of wasting the barn. The porch lasted for the entire winter. Now no one could ever come in the front door again. We were the grasshoppers of *Athalattia*. Grasshoppers have faith. Ants have their work. Some natural phenomenon always occurred just when we were running out of hubris. It reinstalled it either by producing a miracle or a catastrophe.

It was summer-time which did final sport to our firewood supply. We were eating in the dining room. All of a sudden Mother looked up from her pinto beans and said:

« Smoke. »

It was the barn. A small curlecue of smoke, very black tailing through one end.

We dropped our forks. With much shouting we rushed out to see what was happening. It was a windy, ecstatic, sun-searing day. It promised everything.

« Shall we call the fire department? » asked Mother.

« They won't come, » said our father.

She gallumphed back into the house and called the fire department, but it said that it never came out to that edge of town, and that if it did, it would do no good since there were no fire hydrants to plug into for water.

« The thing is not the barn, » said Mother, « but the house. It will catch fire to the house. »

A flame leapt up. She hung up on the fire department. She came out. There was a shed which was a tinderbox, an outside kitchen which was a tinderbox, and the house itself. Inside the house was the grand piano, a wooden Hawaiian

papaya bowl, my father's steel desk, and a thousand books to burn.

Our father immediately plugged the hose and began spraying the wall, the shed, the trees and the west wall of the house. People gathered. Colored people came up from the shacks and sat down with watermelons by the blackberry patch, just outside the reach of Scylla and Charybdis, our two German shepherd (mongrel) dogs. They took out their knives and began to cut the watermelons while gazing with delight.

The wind rose. Water from the hose splattered on the pebbles. All of a sudden the barn let go into a magnificent swirl of orange. The wind whipped it in an ecstasy of destruction.

But the barn was too far. We began to take turns watering the ground, the trees and the buildings, until we were certain that there would be no contagion. Then we all sat down to enjoy the fire. We brought out our dining room chairs and a gallon of lemonade.

The magnificent moment came when it all caved in. This was the highlight of the day. It took two hours to burn straight to the ground. When it was over, we went to see what could be salvaged. The pump-organ was completely wrecked. Only the keyboard survived. It looked like a pair of forgotten false teeth lying among the charred stumps.

Next day we counted. There were thirty-eight slivers of flesh-mouldy and green watermelon rinds attracting flies by the black-berry bush, and thirteen charred beams of the barn which we calculated would work for the winter's firewood.

Living in such an abode it was necessary to play a game of self-aggrandizement. We calculated who and when such and such famous persons were born and graduated from log cabins, who had read by firelight, who had almost starved yet been a success, and who, like Jane Eyre and Dickens characters had had to break ice in their bowls in the mornings before washing their faces. It was so cold when it was cold that we never looked forward to Christmas vacation. Not only were there holes in the walls caused by the rotting of boards, the gnawing of animals, and general decay, but termites kept us awake at night with a continual buzzing sound. I imagined they had teeth. But they do bite people as well as wood. We

were sparing of every stick of wood we burned and every drop of kerosene we poured. Night after night when the stove was out we looked to lightbulbs for warmth.

The stove was put out when the family went to bed. It ticked fitfully, growing cold. It cracked like heart-flutter. Then it died. It was silent and stone-cold. The wind used to howl through the toothless gums of rotten boards. The winter moon could be seen through the cracks. The stones began to crumble down the cold chimney from shivered birds, and they spattered against the orange crates which we had put against the maw of the fireplace to prevent the draft.

I sat in my parka which had been bought years ago at L. L. Beans in Kennebunkport, Maine, with a sweater under that. Each hand I held up its opposite sleeve. My feet were huddled on a neighboring chair to keep them out of the breeze which swept the floor. And the only thing which was exposed were my eyes which were fastened on the page of my book, and my nose which stuck over the collar of the parka. Sometimes I even put up the hood of my parka and mused that I was an Eskimo studying for a Bachelor's Degree.

Going to bed was an operation, but you had the virtue of knowing that at least in ten minutes you would have warmed up your bed like a hot hut. It had another virtue. You were so cold already that to take off every piece of clothing could not have made you colder. Getting up in the morning was plunging into an icy world. You shivered for half an hour until the work of getting breakfast and breakfast itself had made you warm.

There were not enough rooms in our shack for all. My two sisters occupied the one bedroom next to the living room. But my brother and I, devotees of a room of one's own, made ours. We nailed a frame-work of boards. Onto these we nailed partitions of curtains.

Curtains cover a multitude of sins. More sins were covered by curtains in our house than they were covered by anything else. My mother was a curtain addict. She even covered the walls with them and told people that they were old and precious tapestries. She also made bags with curtain material and became a first-rate scavenger.

Thus then, the private rooms of my brother and myself

were instantaneously successful. The wind howled through them in winter inflating the curtains like sails. The noise was like a megaphone. These rooms were constructed in a large hallway which led to the bathroom. The boards of the floor buckled every time someone walked through and sank our beds like two boats about two inches. The partitions did not extend to the ceiling, only to a point slightly above our heads.

It was here that I met the rat, after midnight. He was wending his way across the top of the partition, just while I was entering the curtain door to my room. I was trapped in four feet of space with the rat two inches from my face above my head. I was afraid to move lest he move. We stared at each other with loathing and awful fear. I had a coathanger in my hand. I remember that I made the attack first, slamming him with the wire coathanger. But he uttered a terrible squeaking scream and escaped. I was left with the coat hanger which had touched him still in my hand, and a feeling of vile and shivering fury. My sister shot this rat two days later with my brother's beebee gun just outside the kitchen door. It was a perfect shot. We all admired her for it. But she boasted continually for two days afterward, so with stringent envy we all told her that it was a peculiar thing to do, that there was perfectly good rat poison that could be used, what was the use of wasting shot (though what it would have been used for nobody knew), etc. etc. We never let her know that we admired it.

The other animals concerned with this house were of a cheerful and charming nature. In the fall the alarm clock was squirrels who pattered over the roof dropping nuts out of their mouths. In the spring chipmunks capered there. One spring day my two sisters had to clear a chipmunk nest out of their room. Swallows were continually stuffing up the chimney. Once we found a turtle behind the mantelpiece clock. Birds were continually trapping themselves in one of our rooms. Scylla and Charybdis guarded the property devilishly, giving the impression that Mr. Rochester, Macbeth, or Greta Garbo lived within. They were never allowed in the house, so they slept under it and let their fleas climb up through the boards. Every now and then we gave them a curative bath with kerosene, but they were splendid wild dogs and did not

take to this treatment. They ate hugely but they did not take a penny out of our pocket because our father used to feed them with bones which he got out of local Greek cafés.

Living in such a way in the U.S.A. of the twentieth century we could easily have become criminals, stupid, or insane. We used to sit around arguing sociology statistics estimating whether or not we would be one of the one out of ten who would end up in a mental institution. We compared ourselves with the Jukes and the Callicacks. But in fact we were even more popular than necessary, though I will not say that we felt either morally or socially impeccable. I will say that we felt morally and socially grand however, for we operated on a transvaluation of values.

For instance, everybody, we learned in sociology, has a certain amount of leisure hours which must be filled with recreation. We knew what we wanted to do in our recreation hours and that was either go to the movies or go to Hill Hall and listen to music on the record players. For the first we did not have the wherewithal. For the second, we needed the extra charge of having a picnic along with the music. To get the wherewithal for movies we used to gather empty coca cola bottles and pepsi-cola bottles until we got twenty-six cents' worth each. Or, failing finding any, we used to sneak around back of the grocery stores and pick them out of the crates, and go around to the front and re-sell them. Or, failing that, we considered it our bounden duty to enter either the Methodist or the Episcopal Churches in town and relieve their poor boxes by shaking the pennies upside down until they came out of the slot. We, we figured, would make much more use out of movie or any other material that was fed into our brains, than hand-outs or donations of these pennies to common poor people. We were out to dehypocriticize all hypocritical institutions, but we curbed this moral impulse at that point at which we thought we would get caught. The Hill Hall expeditions were less frequent and more rarified. To prepare for listening to music, the four of us would swarm into the dime store. While some of us would decoy the clerks' attention with pretences of wanting something that was not available, the others would steal certain hard crackers with raisins in them and some of that chocolate candy filled with

lumpy heavy peppermint inside which looks like overblown cow-turds. This was always successful. Then we would pile on up to Hill Hall, stuff ourselves in one cubicle, turn on Wagner and Beethoven to heaven-size, and amuse ourselves by writing on the wall: « I died inside while listening to the Appassionata. » while really eating candy and cookies.

All kinds of projects were underway at our house. We translated the Memoirs of a French Visitor to the Court of Catherine the Great because we thought it would sell (it was full of dirt). We typed theses, term papers and plays, including some of the historical pageants put on in key places in the Carolinas. Our father played the part of the old Greek in *Time of Your Life*. We read to blind students, and then plotted to take the same courses with them so we could get paid for studying. Mother took Social Work at graduate school and got the job of Child Welfare Worker after a mistake on her birth certificate made her nine years younger than she really was. We had thousands of parties. And then we decided that our house was the perfect place for a movie location.

It was a silent movie. The plot was about a southern trash woman with a cretin daughter who falls in love with the hired hand. But the mother catches them in the barn and their romance is wrecked. Grace Medallion wrote the script. Belinda Francis and Wilkie Phillips two of our friends in the play-makers were to take the love interest and we got one of the leading ladies of the town to play the part of the trashy woman. Grace Medallion also was the director. And Archie Makin, who planned to be a photographer, was to use his cameras and be the camera man. Things went fine until Grace and Archie had a big fight. The movie broke up after the shooting of five scenes. And our house was left with cameras, lights, wires and electrical equipment all over it. We had to pick our way carefully through the mess like high-trotters until our friends came to take it all away. Everything was patched up, but the movie was never finished. Still extant are some of the shots of the well and Mrs. Faith Shafter Lowestoft standing at the doorway with her hair all messed up, calling for her cretin daughter.

At last one day in August something happened. It had been threatening for two years. Everything in the town was

becoming prosperous. Prices were going up. Rents were rising. Property was becoming valuable. The Negro landlord of Athallattia wanted his house back, because he intended to live in it himself. The lease was worthless because it had not been stamped by a justice of the peace. The sheriff paid a call and told us he would give us one day to get our stuff out of the house. If it was not out he and the town deputies would put it all out on the road.

Visions of our grand piano sitting proud and shiny on the white dirt road, surrounded by water-melon rinds and honeysuckles!

We made it a Do It Yourself moving. My father had some laundry trucks by now. These we packed and tied until they swayed. My mother cooked a gargantuan macaroni meal. Wilkie Phillips, Grace Medallion, Archie Makin, and all of our friends including a student named Professor Bagg O. Meal came to move the piano. With no levers and no dollies, my mother, her tongue hanging transfixed out of her mouth, her breath in suspension, watched horrified as burly boys creaked, groaned, and laughed under the weight. The remaining porch steps broke. The boys, one, two, three, heaved the piano onto a waiting pick-up truck. And then, before we were ready to leave the house forever, all sat down to stuff themselves on the remaining table out of the pot of macaroni.

Furniture is naked upon a van. Privacies are spilled out upon the public road. Springs and mattresses bulging over the side of a truck testify to sleep. And it is possible to sleep a thousand different ways. Cooking stoves perched upon bookcases testify to meals of countless hundreds. Hideously pathetic, households without houses, households in transit, supposedly having come from somewhere, yet going supposedly to somewhere else. The whole dormant, racked, helpless heap of the personality's utensils and the bodies' aids look curiously nowhere.

We farmed our furniture out.

And we farmed ourselves out.

The posture of people's morality changes when the stone is rolled. You might say there is a different vision houseless than the vision housed. Gypsying is an encumbrance if you haul a grand piano on your back. Some of us had jobs by

now, none of us experience. But everyone of us believed in Hestia.

Everyone builds their own Hestia. For ours we had mighty faith. And we gave sacrifices of time and of energy. We wanted a No Name House, a Final House, a One's Own House, a House We Build, a house from which we conceived that we would never have to move again, unless by our own volition. A Respectable House. Even perhaps a Beautiful House. It was to be in the shape of a U.

We sold some bonds we never knew we had.

We bought the land. It was a six acre plot upon a hillside three miles out of town. Virgin forest. With a rocky crag which led to a plateau at the bottom.

We plotted it out with sticks upon the ground. It did not look big enough, this house.

We cut down the trees.

We suspended an electric light from a tree with a wire plugging into the highway electricity.

We cut down trees for the drive. We chopped down trees for the spot of the house.

We laid the first cinder blocks.

Did you have blocks when you were a child? Then you know what building a house is. There are the materials on the ground. We had to get twelve inch cinder blocks (for the foundation) and eight inch cinder blocks (for the walls). We had to buy large beams for the foundation of floors and roofs, two-by-fours for the partition beams, and two-by-eights for the ribs of the floor and roof. We had to buy twenty bags of Portland cement, 90 pounds each. We had to have a trough to mix cement. We had to have nine truckloads of sand. We had to have a huge pile of tongue and groove boards for floor and roof.

We contemplated the living room to be 50 by 22. Four bedrooms, one bath. Kitchen 18 by 19. Smaller dining room. It looked like nothing when it was a ditch in the ground. But it was huge!

We did every bit of work ourselves except for the cesspool. We hired two colored men to dig this for \$ 15.00.

People told us that we would get this house half done and then have to call in architects to get us out of the mess.

« There were those two students down on the Durham Road. They thought — » « Yes, » we said, nodding up and down.

It was hot as hades. We uprooted, dug stumps, chopped with axes and saw. We chopped out the drive way. It turned into a muddy bog. McPherson's truck got stuck. Every morning we arrived in our old Chevrolet and got out of its four doors like Little Caesar's gangsters.

My sister's boyfriend at this time was an Egyptian. Egyptians never used levels for the Pyramids. We waved my sister with the trowel. She followed him obediently carrying fifty pounds of wet cement on a piece of tin. He refused to use a level. He constructed the end wall. The floor was going in at the same time. Imam called on us to praise him. We did.

The next night it rained. When we came to the lot there was a tragedy. Imam's wall was fallen like the Wall of Jericho. But it was no trumpet. The boards of the floor had swelled with rain and cast his wall upon the ground.

« Your cement has holes in it like Swiss cheese! » we complained.

Professor Meal was a quixotic boy and it was he who estimated the blind could put on cement as well as the sighted. It was as a consequence of this remark that we called up and got hordes of blind things to come and help lay cement. But if they could feel to put on cement, the half build construction was a death trap to them. They could not move. Therefore the job of carrying blind people over the ribs of floors beneath which was a pit bigger than Pluto's was the job assigned to Professor Meal. He staggered on his six foot legs and the blind people never knew how near death they were.

Bodo Poole, a huge English major, was the best pick and shovel man. While the walls were going up the basement was being dug. Every man at the university wanted a try at digging. The hole grew deeper and deeper and the walls grew higher and higher. The shovelfuls had to be aimed through the kitchen door. Aiming was as important as digging. Professor Meal always failed in his aim and got shovelfuls of wet red clay bouncing back from the wall onto his face and into his meticulous shirt. The reason Bobo was a champion was that he spat before every shovelful and loosened the clay into a veritable bog. He came known as Hock the Sound

of Tar Heel Voices Spit Ringing Clear and True (Spit Spit).

Professor Meal took a great dislike to our father, not only because our father always wanted to boss the proceedings, but because our father beat him in all arguments. Therefore he urged us to put in trap doors, one in the bathroom, so that when my father picked up his razor he would drop down to the basement, and one in the living room, where, if he picked up a book, it would be suspended on a cable wire and toss him up through the chimney. Professor Meal was also continually berating us for putting the house in the shape of a U. He said: « If you had made it square it would have been much less work. You would have it done by now. » What he said was so true that we could not bear it. He was continually telling us that we looked like ancient cats on the walls, that we were wrecking our complexions, and that if we continued drinking lemonade we would become sour. He got carried away with his ideas of trap doors and wanted one for Mother too, to make her disappear when she opened the oven door.

We worked sometimes into the middle of the night. People living a mile down the highway complained at night of not being able to sleep because of the hammer blows. But we were determined to move in by Christmas. It was an aesthetic experience working at night. It was like a wild Romany fair. The night sky was dark. The forest was vast, hidden, filled with living birds and animals. The one electric bulb cast its glow upon the tunnel of trees, lit up our faces with tumultuous excitement. There was an ecstatic sensation of being the pulse of the universe in the midst of a dark and immense night, with a symphony of sawing, pounding, hauling, and laughter. Our faces wrang with sweat. We drank gallons of lemonade. We became animal-like. We ate like hogs at troughs of macaroni or baked potatoes.

Our father was not allowed to boss all proceedings. Thus he took to pruning trees. While we sweated to put up the mere foundation of the house, he was planting and gardening as if the place were some elegant eighteenth century country seat. But in crises, he came through.

It rained at midnight. We had to finish putting the boards on the roof. In a streaming cloud-burst we were all perched

upon the ribs of roof, under the electric light swinging and dripping from the tree. My father laughed with rain dripping off his chin. « Work! » he shouted. « Hammer! » he called. « We'll do it! » he said. And the smell of wet lumber and pungent earth goaded us until we felt like ragged rowing balls of yarn from the eaves.

We were a *pièce de théâtre*. The site was the stage. We, the players. The audience were people in the town who had a burning interest. Professor David lent us a saw which we wrecked. Every week he paid a visit, nodded dryly, and left. The teacher of romance languages conceived of us as victims for his complex on James Joyce. Weekly he led his wife to the site. They praised. And then he sat down to read a half an hour of *Finnegan's Wake* out loud. We kept a constant supply of beer on hand for the boys which we would dole out when they had accomplished certain things.

On the second row of blocks we forgot to stagger. The row went completely around the house before we discovered it. We put in a half block then and hoped that nobody would notice. But we had the discomfort that goes with ruining perfection.

Mother would never come to see the progress of the house. She was afraid to.

The tops of the windows caused a crisis. We had to take off an entire day to scavenge the junkyards of Raleigh and Durham to find cheap angle-irons.

The windows caused another crisis. We had ordered steel ones from Montgomery Ward. Suddenly we were notified that they were in the freight depot at Carrboro, COD. We could not pay for them. We found out that in ten days they would be sent back. Then we sent out an SOS for borrowed money, and got them out of hock.

We blew out the tire of the laundry truck hauling shingles fifty miles from Sears Roebuck. They weighed one ton. My brother and I jacked the truck up, put on another bad tire, and rolled slowly to the site.

When we arrived up to the roof we were near victory. All three sections of the U were different sizes. This meant that each of the three roofs had a different slant. The roof over the kitchen had a slant so steep that you could not lie

on it to shingle. We had a bitter argument on how to heap the roof, and we solved it by compromise. One section is heaped one way and the other a different way. We got so we could run along the ribs of the roof like chimpanzees. All except Professor Meal. He got alta sickness and had to stay on the ground. He retaliated by saying we looked like crows in a nest.

Shingling the roof was a delight. We were not like crows then, but like delicate birds flapping three-section shingles. We used pretty tacks instead of jaw-grinding nails. It was refined work. We created poetry with those shingles. It was late November. The sun shone down through the red and yellow leaves. Our laughter tinkled. Every Saturday afternoon we brought the radio out and listened to the football game. We became connoisseurs and plenipotentiary critics of every play and every player.

When Mother came to visit, it was done. She did not say a word. Simply looked.

There is no Hestia now for any hearth. There is no need, for there is no hearth. We reserve our god for other things, since if we have not defeated nature we have at least sifted her outward manifestations into bottles and wires. God has become already more miraculous and more unbelievable. When it comes to him, people give up at once, naming that state freedom. They call hearths sentimental.

We put a huge sentimental hearth in our house. It was nearly six feet wide. We have no barns to burn. We have six acres of woods.

Our house is noble. You should see it and you would call it noble too. It sits there in that forest like a double-eyed giant, a cinder block sphinx, between its paws a patio. Its windows are serene. Its curtains are eyelids. Its roof is a magnetic mitre cap. Its running water and its electricity are a smile in the wilderness.

It brooks no rats.

It has insulation and perfect foundations. It has a perpetual symphony of birds and pine-tree music, but the inside of the house contains no animals.

It is a hidden house, but it holds out its arms for you to visit.

« Come, » it says, « for I contain a hearth that defies category. »

JAMES WRIGHT

THE AVENGER

*She — the woman whom I loved
Longer than her beauty lasted,
Loved as long as starlight moved
Carefully around the earth —
Lies behind me, old in death,
All her quiet patience wasted.*

*Now I walk beneath the night,
Having watched her die all day.
Rain veils soft the bedroom light
Where I held her in my arms.
What blind movers of the storms
Steal the living heart away?*

*Greek avengers used to cry
Of three women in the air.
Deaf to that religion, I
Leave my barren house and seek
Forces of my own to speak
Simple reasons for despair.*

*Waiting for the rain to fall,
Waiting for the air to slice
Lilies' heads along the wall;*

*Knowing soon enough the wind
Strikes the bee and rabbit blind,
Blows the sparrow out of eyes,*

*How should I begin to say
Everything I should have said?
Why should winter blow away
Fleshes bodied up in summer?
Hushed up like a silly rumor,
In the house my love is dead.*

*Had I caught her in the dark
Snarled in an alien lover's hair,
Murdered him, and left her stark
Wandering among the trees,
I could go to bed in peace,
Knowing I had done my share.*

*Had some human murderer
Beaten her to death alone,
Knowing I had done my share
Hunting him and cursing him,
I could let her face and name
Fade into a nub of stone.*

*She, however, loved me so,
I must seek her killers out.
I, who wonder where they go;
Follow faces through a door,
Slip along the river shore,
Leap, and echo every shout.*

*They who scatter down the rain,
Lop the lilies' heads away,
Spill a saucer, blow the pane
Open as I sit and stare,
Stitch a cobweb in the air,
Blind the rabbit, blind the bee:*

*What have I to do with such,
 Whether they be here or gone?
 Let them crumble at a touch
 Continents, suck up the sea,
 Level a blind mountain down;
 Let me alone, let me alone.*

AT THE EXECUTED MURDERER'S GRAVE

*Reflective calm, you tangle, root and bone,
 Fang, fist, and skull, that huddle down alone.
 Sparrows above him, sneaking like police,
 Peck at the lawn, the hedge, the careful trees.
 Man's wild blood has no heart to overcome
 Vengeance and summer and the lily's bloom.
 Henceforth, so long as I myself shall live,
 Earth will be torn, the mind be fugitive.
 My shadow flees me over mattocked stone:
 Father and citizen, I killed this man,
 This man who killed another who might kill
 Another who might slay another still
 Till the tall shadows of mankind are cast
 Bodiless on the empty stars at last.
 Rage and destruction trouble me, and fade.
 The casual flocks of sunbeam round my head
 Flutter away to dusk, and I am dark,
 Peering between the granites for his mark.
 Slow hills away, the milch-cows pause and yawn,
 Wondering when day will go, and man be gone:
 That one man, angry at the heart's release,
 This brutal pastoral, this unholy peace.*

DUDLEY HUPPLER

MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

I

There came an afternoon some quail settled down over the back porch and in the elm trees, asylummed with nervousness their leader. Nothing to portend, no sign to make on the air, they sat their time — a covering of twitches and starts that caught small fires and then quieted down. Then as a herd they struck out again, clumpingly gaining ascension, ramming the sky. They had looked with simple eyes at the brick of the house and the cement steps and the porch rug.

II

As the accomplice of the hair, the comb carries guilt. The sworn soap on the table has come a secret journey down the skin; its white is not innocence. Think of the pile made by the severings it has contracted and the scissors are condemned with the rest. And the cup remembers the sensation of the lip; the glass has seen beyond its understanding; the postcard is too implicated with hands. We end by being only what the mute object holds its lips about; with every instrument the eye and ear of the instant's mortality, we should sneak down the street of the hour.

III

Out of her eyes pecked two birds, assailants of the new grief she felt to have become the world's encumbrance. « There is death beyond this dying, » she would argue. « Pain off its bed, walking the sidewalks, out under the lights, can only be the Fiend's delectation; it is to be, must be, trussed and backed into a closet, the victim of « now-forgotten » playing « never-knew ». Feverfew for the infected — jolts in the bum to the ailers and awkers. » So she would go on, her face chalked from her crusader's fire.

IV

A design of a girl called Letha upon the future: « To be rich enough to afford a maid to comb, all day long, the fringe on the rugs. » Is it red hair explains the dreaming such Irish dreams?

V

Something to do: go find a country and be the protomartyr thereof.

VI

A slim moon set basketwise in the sky shoots cold light. In the yards the snow-piles are climped like dummies. A walker between here and there goes to the noise of a silence-machine playing The February Blues. It is all too aching a sight. Turn away from the window and fall over into bed and try to shout.

VII

The terror over: to avoid a sale of her effects at Sharratt's upon her demise, she orders everything to be dumped in the middle of the lake. Now the fish poke at stoves, davenports, desk; moss takes root in rugs. It is a way to do it.

VIII

Callista hangs out her big blowsy velvet dresses on the fire-escape to air and leaves them there for days, through sun and rain. « They cast a shadow in the baby's room, » Carol in aggravation writes, « I'm waiting for this phase to pass. »

IX

There was nothing, just lake, then suddenly, but with the appearance of naturalness, an orange — floating on the surface, plump and nicely cooled, right there amongst us. We accepted it as a quirk of fortune, peeled and ate it. Ten minutes later it was hard, if not impossible, to believe in it at all. But there was a bitey taste lingering on the mouth-line, and I dare say a nudging and heaving of new vitamins somewhere inside us all, wherever that happens. Lord, what if it were poisoned! Say, this is Madison, not Egypt. Some kid threw it out his lunchbox, for the throw. I wish another one would come floating along right now. Or a pineapple — with a butcherknife, to facilitate matters. Oh, summer!

XI

Spring was her hard time. Flowers in a room meant only that they were dying, would be gone so fast. She'd up from a conversation and hustle out with a bouquet held away from her like a pestiferous thing. If there was any comment that it was perfectly good, why toss it, she'd shiver with a resounding horror: « An hour or two — that's all they possibly had left. » Living meant, too precisely, starting to die — every bud breaking was an assault on her delicate nervous apparatus; a package of seeds was like needles at her, moaning and groaning little tragedies to be enacted.

XII

The eyes from their level hoist to graze a felicity of clouds: a ribbonade, a tattering baldaquin; the heart stalls one yearning second, overladen. Swings appointedly into the sky's court at that instant an edge, a fan of moon. Martins as if fall up. Cool opens the evening.

XIII

Inside the gazebo she sat, her white face in a fanlight made of her crimped black hair. With the deliberateness of a trained bird she closed to her pomatum box and jerked a hair from her pet — a peacock's harrangue collided with the dog's silly wail. In the wake of the noise, a bee-man with a smudgepot walked slowly across the view; she spat — faugh! The sunlight climbed a tree and the chaffinches scattered — seeming to sail, wish-wise, through the gazebo and stick fast to her heart like a duster or an absurd bouquet. It was then the bee-man turned on himself and re-crossed the landscape in the fashion of a masker, his head turned her way and a light whistle on his lips. So, to a girl bored with her innocence, came one summer's day the seed of speculation.

XIV

There was, in the circus menagerie, a baby giraffe — looking new but somehow, at the same time, tremendously sullen-hearted — weary of elephant boys, electricity, travel, people, and possibly its own awkwardness, because it sat and did not rise. Next day, we saw the city zoo's baby giraffe — wispy, cloud-cuckoo, dazzled by its own impossibility. All around were signs commanding quiet, silence — and a cautionary guard curbed the whispers of the sentimental. The mother giraffe, it was quite obvious, was worried about the temperature.

WILLIAM DEMBY

FROM A JAPANESE NOTEBOOK

NAKIRI

If, as many people believe, Japanese women are among the sweetest women in the world (and I am among those who believe this), then there are no sweeter women in all Japan than the good pearl divers of Nakiri.

Theirs is a small fishing settlement nearly hidden amidst the giant rocks of Ise Bay on the western coast of Honshu, the main island of the Japanese homeland. Prosperous as fishing villages go, it is a busy place with work for everyone, though most of the time this work is ill paid. In swift slender boats which cut the waves like darts, the men go out to sea at night and return at dawn with tons of halibut which you see in every villager's hut hanging like stockings over the *hibachi*, the ever-present charcoal burners. Many men in this village have been lost at sea in typhoons, and mountainous seas have washed away the roofs of some of the houses. But mainly Nakiri is a village of women, and these women are divers, freer, less submissive than women are in most parts of Japan, though never, never does the hardship of their life or their relative financial independence from the men cause them to be aggressive or hard.

We arrived in Nakiri one cloud-threatening morning to film the life of the famed pearl divers. Word had gone around the village that we would come that day and the whole popula-

tion, seemingly, had turned out to welcome our Buick and Ford station-wagons. The diving season was over and for this reason most of the pearl divers had gone to the hills to gather sweet potatoes. Indeed the whole village was snowed under with slices of sweet potatoes spread out to dry over every available space, on rooftop and street. Others of the pearl divers were working on the street with the men. Dressed in characteristic dark-blue and white striped kimonos and pantaloons, the age-old work costume of the region, they marked our passing with only a courteous glance before turning back to their rope-making, street cleaning and sweet potatoe slicing like perpetual motion manikins. That very evening, in a gloomy inn, though the best one in the village, we invited the pearl divers to dinner. They would talk to us about their work, and on the basis of what they would tell us, we would shoot the sequence about pearls.

We had just seated ourselves uncomfortably on the floor mats when the girls came trouping in, their eyes downcast, like slaves being led to execution. Food was brought in — first a clear soup and then various delicacies of fish and rice. From the other side of the room where they had taken places, the pearl divers watched our clumsy efforts with the chop-sticks, apprehensively, sitting tense on their cushions as if meaning to jump up from their places at any moment to help us manage the food. All of us were embarrassed — we and the pearl divers — and as we ate a heavy silence fell over the room.

No doubt we had expected something quite different in the way of pearl divers — somewhere in the back of our minds lurked the technicolor images of lithe, oriental versions of Dorothy Lamour. But these girls were short, thick-bodied and at least in those surroundings, anything but graceful. I think they sensed our disillusionment, for when it came time to ask them questions about their work, they were reluctant to talk. After several attempts to draw them into conversation failed, we gave up, and through our interpreter, they asked if they might be excused; we were quite willing to let them go.

The director was outspoken: Were these the famed pearl divers of Toba? Were there no more beautiful girls than these?

The head of the pearl divers cooperative was summoned. A mild-mannered young man, a stranger himself in that village, he remained completely baffled by our request. Why must the girls be beautiful? Was it not enough that they know how to dive well? Nevertheless, he assured us that by the time we were ready to begin shooting the next morning he would have found the most beautiful diving girls in the region and would have them down at the wharf waiting when we arrived.

That morning the streets were crowded as on a feast day. One mother had painted the lips of her infant a garish red and wrapped her in a gay festival kimono figured with the goodluck symbols of stork and fish. On the docks, under a shed, were four slippery plum-colored sharks large enough to swallow a man. Their razor-sharp teeth still dripped with blood and their stomachs had been split open. There was a huge turtle there too. It was still alive and now and then it moved a leg, tentatively, as though unwilling to accept the nightmarish reality of having been yanked forever from its home on the bottom of the sea. A ragged idler sauntered close and, watching me shyly from the corner of his eye, gave the turtle a vicious kick. Three hundred years old is the turtle, was his hissed comment, three hundred years old and still good to eat!

Now even the dock workers stopped scrubbing the floor of the fishermen's cooperative shed to crowd around and watch. There was one tall, baldheaded man (later he was to become our boatman) who stood out from all the others. Smiling to himself as at some secret joke, he pushed a path for us through the crowd and led us to where the pearl divers were squatting against a wall, their backs turned away from us, their faces buried in their sleeves, their expressions numb as if they were enduring great pain. Only the younger, more curious of them would peek out at us as we approached for a better look: the others cringed closer against the wall. Once again they must have sensed that we were not satisfied. Indeed, the whole village must have understood, for time to time people would go out of their way to point out this or that girl as being suitable to « star » in our film.

There was one girl that attracted my attention. She was suffering so under our concerted gazing that her breath came in quick irregular gasps. She had one of those calm, tragically beautiful faces which one sees so often among Japanese peasants. It was a beauty that came from within, a strange illusive beauty born of suffering and selflessness. I pointed her out to the others, but they weren't convinced: « Such a face would only move a Roman audience to laughter. » Later I had H. ask about her. She was a young widow woman, a neighbor said, a widow woman whose husband had been lost at sea in the typhoons of last year. She couldn't have been more than seventeen.

But the girl who became our « star » was no pearl diver at all, but a young shopkeeper I discovered while wandering through the upper village, the district where the poorer people lived, a scrambled stack of weather stained houses, a confusion of fishy smells, dogs, and shameless naked children. Attracted by a mound of soft straw sandals which blocked the doorway of her shop, I stopped to buy a pair, intending, naively, to take them back to Italy with me to wear the next summer on the beach. But there wasn't a single pair that would fit me and Kimiko (that was her name) was so amused that she nearly rolled on the floor with delight: such big feet she had never seen in her life before. By that time all her neighbors had flocked out of their houses to watch the spectacle, and their uninhibited laughter incited dogs, chickens, children and birds, so that even down on the waterfront they must have heard the confusion my innocent shopping had aroused.

Actually, it was the old woman who ruled over the pearl divers like a jealous grandmother who selected Kimiko for the role. The script called for a wedding and there wasn't a girl in the whole village willing to risk bringing bad luck down on herself by defiling that solemn occasion in front of the camera. Yet the film people must not be offended — they were the village people's guests. So the old woman and the young man from the pearl diver cooperative canvassed the village house by house. Two days passed without success and we had to be content with shooting long shots of the diving

girls from the top of the jagged cliff. Then Kimiko was thought of. After long consultation over countless cups of tea her aged parents agreed. There was only one small disadvantage: she had never been to sea.

But we didn't know this. So great was their zeal in satisfying our strange requests that they overlooked this, for them, insignificant detail. Only, in the middle of an important shot, when Kimiko turned pale and leaned over the edge of the boat to relieve herself did we understand. Poor girl, she was like a virgin sacrificed to the barbarians — though, as we discovered later, she was far from being a virgin: indeed, in six weeks she was going to have a baby! But by then we had used so much film on her that there was no possibility of finding a substitute. Had we not been so hysterical about finding our « star » we might have judged from her appearance that she was no creature of the sea. For she was very small and bird-like, always laughing, with a nervous ungainliness to her movements, almost uncoordinated they were, which contrasted with the muscular grace of the professional divers. She was brave though; and perhaps from a deep-rooted sense of duty she never hesitated to go out in the boats, even when the sea was high and threatening. In the end, however, our shooting plans had to be altered, for, one day when we were out in heavy sea, she fainted from sea-sickness (and pregnancy) and had to be brought to shore.

Strange, though, was the day of the wedding! So much excitement was in the air that it might have been an Imperial Princess who was involved. At Toba, a two hour drive away, robes and a suitable nuptial wig had been rented. All afternoon villagers filed in and out of the pearl diver cooperative to gape at the embroidered silk and the wig. On the following morning, the day of the « ceremony », so many people crowded on the edge of the wooded Shrine overlooking the bay that the village police force had its hands full keeping dogs and children from running into range of our camera.

The Shinto ceremony is a simple affair: there is ceremonious tea drinking before the altar where offerings of fruit and fish have been placed, silent prayers — the clapping of

hands to honor the *kami* — and a simple procession of relatives and friends. But in spite of their superstitious belief that a false wedding would bring bad luck to all who took part, everyone from the priest (a proud silent man, a forest priest, sedate and introspective in his heavily draped purple robes and black lacquered silk headpiece) to the bride in her heavy oiled wig and whitened face participated with a seriousness that could not have been more convincing had the wedding been real! So silent were the participants and the spectators that only the birds flitting about in the branches of the pine trees overhead and the whirring of the electric motor on the camera could be heard.

As the days went by, we became part of the village: people greeted us by name and schoolboys who had studied English in school would hover around our automobiles for hours waiting to practice the few phrases they had learned. A nurse from the Government Hospital watched us shooting from afar and whenever she had a half hour to spare would stand around wistfully asking the pearl divers what it was like to act in the films. She herself was from a fisherman's family, though from a village far away, and one day she persuaded our electrician — the only one who had managed to learn a few words of Japanese, the Don Giovanni of our group — to let her appear in a scene. So from that day on the student nurse would put on a borrowed *ama* costume — a white cotton slip and dark blue quilted kimono — and dive with the other girls, though when they would come out of the water to stand around the fire, she would stand a little apart. But if the pearl divers were cool toward her, she had other consolations. For she had fallen in love with the electrician who had befriended her and one day entered the inn where we ate our noonday meal to present him with a tiny pearl stick-pin as a token of her love. This she did without shame, walking boldly through the crowd of village loafers and noisy schoolboys who always stood around us whatever we were doing. Whether her love was returned or not, I can't truly say, though one Sunday when she was off duty the gruff Roman electrician had a secret tryst with her on the wooded path that led from the hospital down to the sea.

Behind the village of Nakiri, amidst hills covered with smoke-green forests, there are countless inlets where the sea is trapped into motionless lakes. This lake region extends for hundreds of square miles, all the way back to the town of Toba. It is a quiet region with an unreal fairyland atmosphere about it. At the end of the last century, the father of the present emperor granted the whole region to Mr. Mikimoto, sometimes described as the « Henry Ford of Japan »: there, because of the ideal temperature and the stillness of the water, he was able to experiment with the artificial culture of pearls.

I have heard it said that Mr. Mikimoto, who is over ninety years old, sleeps at night with two maidens tucked at his side. I like to think that this legend is true, for though I have never met the venerable gentleman, it is impossible to go anywhere in the region without feeling his archaic benevolent presence. He lives in a fabulous mansion, a mixture of European and Japanese styles, on a place called Pearl Island which he has made into a combination personal shrine to the pearl industry and showplace, which is visited by countless tourists (among them the Emperor and even General Ridgeway) who are herded around by an ominous loudspeaker voice and shown how Mr. Mikimoto impregnates live oysters with clamshell irritants in such a way as to produce, in five years time, a cultivated pearl.

One Japanese merchant told me that most pearls are brought to the international market by smuggling, that the price of a pearl in Europe or America is five times what it costs in Japan. When there is a shortage of pearls of a certain size Mikimoto may buy from a small producer, but mostly his plant is self-sufficient, for he has cornered nearly eighty per cent of the world market. They have a fleet of motor launches, schools to train technicians and a laboratory suitable for the surgery ward of the most modern hospital. A huge bronze likeness of him, five times the size of the man, looks down over these achievements with the stern uncompromising gaze of a cranky grandfather.

But naturally the story of pearls begins with the divers themselves, who no longer dive for pearls as they did in ancient

times, but dive for young oysters which they sell by weight to the pearl farming companies to be impregnated. It is arduous work; the season lasts from March to early November, and they dive even when the water is very cold. For this reason the young girls soon get a withered, oldwomanish wrinkling to their faces while their bodies and limbs (even those of the old crones) remain virginally lithe. These days they are organized into cooperatives which protect their interests; but though they earn more money than the men of the village, few of them have money enough to buy themselves a pearl necklace, even a small one of imperfect cast-off pearls.

So there they go now, moving slowly toward the boats, sullenly, not quite understanding what they are expected to do, glad to have the double pay, glad to return to the sea, glad to leave the sweet potato patches on the mountainside. Life is hard in Japan, life is work. Men die and men are lost at sea. The boats are small and there is much fishing to do. At fifteen years a girl becomes a diver. She goes out with the other women in a boat and dives down fifteen or twenty feet to gather the oysters. There are sharks in the water and at first she is afraid. Until she is an old woman with grandchildren she dives down into the familiar dream beauty barely in sight of the shore where the fishermen sleep.

Like tightrope walkers they file through the streets self-conscious in their unexpected importance. They parade past the men and women embroidering nets, past the other girls turning the rope-making machine, past the children lowering paper boats into the water. On their shoulders are balanced the baskets containing their heavy kimonos which they will put on when they come out of the water, and dried pine branches which they will use to make fire with in the bottom of their boats.

The sun falls below the cliff, and now the shadows jump out strong as the first blotted impression of a woodcut. Evening comes, and life in the village gravitates toward the west beach where the last warm rays bring out the old women who sit under the nets sunning their bared maiden legs, sucking in their wrinkled cheeks, keeping watch over the pearl divers'

tumbling infants. It is a time for subdued evening games and three young girls gather a dessicated starfish, pieces of coral, mother-of-pearl, bleached bones, the claws of a lobster, and even a live crab with which to make a miniature garden. What a beautiful creation they are making! They huddle around the back of the fisherman's hut in secret and pour layer after layer of sand over it, modeling it, landscaping it with a miniature broom of twigs. Then, with infallible instinct, they place each object in its place: bright orange starfish, pinkish, sunset-hued tree of coral, and mother-of-pearl shells. And in the very center of the garden they place the living crab, an ugly obscene idol.

Then come three restless schoolboys. From behind the fence they spy on the girls with rapt expressions on their face, until suddenly they are seized with an uncontrollable destructive urge and they break into a run and kick the garden to bits — earthquake, tidal waves, typhoons, destroyers they have become! And this too is part of the Japanese soul. The three little girls salvage their precious objects as best they can and put them back in the cardboard box and walk away submissively; they haven't said a word. While under the fishermen's shed at the wharf the buyer's boat waits for the shark's head to be sawed off and placed into a box like a coffin.

SHICHI-GO-SAN

Great throngs have come to Meiji Shrine, for today is Shichi-go-san, the Feast of « 7-5-3. » 7-5-and 3 are lucky numbers and all children, be they rich or poor, must go to the local Shinto shrine to invoke the blessing of the guardian spirit and receive a lucky charm from the priest. It is a day for happy children and a day for proud parents. Careful not to show too much enthusiasm as is the way with Japanese children, holding tight to the parent's hand, they walk with solemn dignity through the lovely shaded park, under the red and gold turned leaves, under the huge red-lacquered torii, to the shrine itself, a simple structure of exquisitely pure, clean-wood lines, set on a knoll nearly a quarter of a mile inside the gate. The little girls are the ones who attract the most attention.

They are all dressed up in bright red yellow and silver kimonos, and their faces have been meticulously painted to resemble dolls. Their expressions are immobile: only a glint in the eye or the sudden tightening of fingers on the mother's hand reveals the overflowing fluttery excitement of the occasion. They walk along stiffly in their feast-day finery, followed by an old woman in a faded brown kimono, the grandmother or a widowed aunt, who every few minutes must stop the procession to adjust and readjust the *obi* sash or retouch a fallen strand of glisteningly black hair. The children all carry a long oblong paper bag decorated with red and yellow pictures of various lucky symbols — a crane and a tortoise, a pine, a bamboo and plum tree or a picture of *Takasago-no-Jijibaba*, the old man carrying a rake to rake in all that is good, the old woman carrying a broom to sweep out evil. Inside the bag there are sweets which eventually the children will eat, but now the bag is carried gingerly as children carry home something breakable entrusted to their care by adults.

I never cease to be moved by Japanese children. I have never seen an unhappy child. Even in conditions of deepest poverty, the eyes of children reflect a pure and happy soul. I have never seen a child scolded, nor heard a mother, irritated perhaps by the cares of the day, raise her voice at her child. Children are protected. They are a privileged race apart and happiness is their right at any cost. They ride close to the mother's back, and when the mother is busy, they ride close to the grandfather's back, or to the back of the older sister or brother. Our psychologists would say that in this way the child is given a profound sense of security — and certainly in Japan this is true. That is why this *Shichi-go-san* is so touching. It is a feast for children as important as any adult feast and every child, rich or poor, celebrates it with a strange introspective seriousness as though conscious for the first time of the importance of his own childhood, aware for the first time that someday happy childhood must come to an end.

Now: another strange thing about this feast day. The shrine is overrun with fathers and brothers and other Japanese men rushing to and fro in a fantastic busy-bee rush of picture taking. Who knows what it means all these expensive

cameras and this mania for taking snap-shots. The photographers are stumbling over each other like ants. They don't seem to care what pictures they take, just so they are measuring the light with the light meter, just so they are following the instructions to the letter, adjusting the time and aperture just right. The subject doesn't matter. One man in a frock coat will stop to take the picture of a particularly doll-like little girl, made up like a miniature *geisha*. In a moment at least twenty other camera bugs will come scrambling around. Their lips pursed, their eyes blinking behind thick glasses they study the exposure meter and nod their head back and forth and mumble figures to themselves. I have never seen so many cameras in one place. There is hardly a male without one (so far I haven't seen a single woman with a camera). Where do they get the money to buy the cameras costing as they do the equivalent in *yen* of nearly a hundred fifty dollars without the extra equipment, and most of them are fairly bulging with accessories. Nor are they rich people. No. There are workers and students among them, all of them taking advantage of the fine weather and the « 7-5-3 » feast to expose their film. They are happy, but their faces are grave and serious as they crowd around an American child, an army Captain's daughter, dressed in kimono, her blonde hair piled high on her head so that she looks like a shrivelled up Madam Pompadour instead of a Japanese child. Yes, this will make a fine shot! and they swarm over the child (in a moment there are at least fifteen of them, and they're still coming) shooting from above, below, on their knees... it's a comic ballet, a grotesque parody of war correspondents and photographers seen in American movies.

The great swarming to the shrine has not let up. Slowly the crowds of people make their way under the giant trees. Even with the vast numbers of people there is a great silence about. Japanese people do not « go to church » as we do. They pay a visit to the shrine as we would go to the park. There is none of the ostentatiousness of our Sunday worship. They visit the shrine, walk through the park and become rested and quiet. Even today, there is in spite of all the picture taking, a feeling of respect and true communion. A feeling of ease and freedom from suffering. There is the breathing in of trees and clean wood and flowers. To build wonderful cameras, bet-

ter even than the fabulous German makes, requires skill and a highly developed technology. But the technology hasn't destroyed the easy breathing, nor cut off the communion with nature, nor drowned out the walking of ghosts.

Outside the first torii, just inside the shrine proper, there is a group of maimed veterans. They are dressed in faded white canvas uniforms which are tattered beyond recognition. Only their visored caps are recognizeable for what they were in the days of the Pacific War. All of them have deformed and maimed bodies, a missing leg, an arm, patches over the eyes. But their faces are vigorous and healthier than the clerks with their cameras. They play guitars and mandolins. The song they are singing is very sad, and contrasts strangely with the wholesome gaiety of the holiday mood. But the people don't seem to mind — for since the war, sadness too has become an exquisite pleasure. A sort of despairing sadness is the mood of all post-war Japan. It is the mood which throbs beneath the festival — this mood is everywhere: on the radio, in the films, in suicides, in the strip-teases, in the expression of clerks on the elevated train. The song the veterans sing too reflects this mood: it is a ballad about two lovers who have lost themselves in the city and never never manage to find themselves again, though both of them never give up the search. Only the children in their gay festival kimonos, holding tight to their lucky bags of sweets, are kept untainted by this mood, for today is the feast of *Schichi-go-san*.

THE BUDDHA FROM CHICAGO

The young American (he couldn't have been older than twenty-eight) was much too tall for that doll-house-like room, which, though designed in the Meiji Era by a wealthy prince for entertaining his western guests, still retained its Japanese proportions — thin sliding doors and an absurdly low ceiling. Even the Victorian style chairs, overstuffed and funereally ornate, certainly a source of great pride to the progress-minded prince, seemed like prop furniture on a stage, deliberately oversize; and now, after more than a year of living in those cramped quarters, the student had developed a stoop, and

walked with his head bent forward and his shoulders arched like a guilty child entering a house where he was certain to be punished.

It was hard to believe that he was a Buddhist, and that someday he would be a Buddhist missionary in grey Chicago, the city where he was born. He was dressed in sweater and slacks; and were it not for certain Japanese mannerisms — turning his head to one side politely, like a bird listening for a worm, when answering a question, for example, or bobbing up and down deferentially when greeting us — he might have been a college boy on any American campus; and a popular one with the girls at that, for he had that soulful, visionary face, not unlike Frank Sinatra in his better days or Abraham Lincoln, and wavy blonde hair, with just the kind of mischievous blue eyes that bring certain success to their fortunate possessor in any field of endeavor in America be it selling, the army, or leading a jazz orchestra. Indeed he had once been an actor in summer stock theatre, and even a radio script writer; now he was studying Buddhism in a Buddhist seminary in Kyoto, and he had no intention of returning to America until he would have become a full-fledged Buddhist priest.

His room was a compromise between a typical Japanese room and a student's room in a college dormitory. Books were piled everywhere. On one side of the room there was an improvised book shelf with college textbooks and American novels most of which he had brought with him from America, piled all the way to the ceiling. On his worktable there was a display of Christmas cards which he had just received from America — Santa Clauses and reindeer adding still another incongruous note in the room. On another table was his typewriter, an ancient Remington, and over it tacked to the wall a huge placard upon which, lettered with a ball-pen in black india ink, was his work plan: each day as he finished his work he would carefully make a cross on the chart with a red pencil.

Soft jazz was coming over his radio. Evidently he had been studying Buddhist hymnals to the bouncing strains of « Honey Suckle Rose ». But in true Japanese fashion he served

us tea and oranges, and as we sat on the floor, the jazz concert, soft in the background, we talked about Japanese musical instruments, a subject about which he knew a great deal, the Noh Theatre, the Japanese alphabet and other topics, though at no time did we talk about Buddhism. One could not help believing in his sincerity — possibly because he had remained so obviously American, without the least hint of posing or of having « gone Japanese. » His studies cost him a great deal of hardship: the room he was living in was part of a house attached to a Buddhist temple and cost him very little; he ate two meals a day that cost him about fifteen cents each in a nearby chophouse. At the beginning of his three year stay in Japan he had had a fellowship from the Zen Buddhist Institute of Chicago, but that had long since run out, and since then he had been earning a little money giving lessons in western music to Japanese university students.

In one corner of his room, in that corner where Japanese families usually set their shrine, he had tacked up a group of photographs — among them was one of a pretty Japanese girl in western clothes. Next to this snap-shot was a picture post-card of a small statue of Buddha, part of a collection in the Boston Museum. He had first seen this statue years ago as a child one day, when his mother took him to visit the museum, and ever since that day, he said, he became interested in Buddhism. The smiling girl in the photograph was the daughter of a Buddhist priest, one of his teachers. He hopes one day to marry this girl, but though he has assured her conservative family that he would marry her in the traditional Buddhist way and would lead a pious Buddhist life, they have violently opposed the marriage for no other reason than that he is a foreigner and an American. We asked him what he would do if they continued their opposition, and he replied that he didn't know, since to do anything rash might compromise forever his chances of becoming a Buddhist priest.

It pained him, I think, to talk about the girl: I hadn't realized how deeply in love he was. Though he continued to smile and be boyishly charming, his fingers began to play restless games of their own, and his eyes would sometimes look past us while we were talking. Out of politeness, he protested

feebly when we got up to go, apologizing for his lack of hospitality by saying that he had to finish deciphering a difficult Buddhist text. Outside the sky had become overcast, and only a sickly light like green tea indicated that the sun was setting. He went to the gate with us and my last impression of him was of a stooped gaunt figure waving in the twilight. As we paused on the street to get our bearings, I could still hear the jazz concert coming over his radio and I imagined him bent over his Buddhist manuscripts, his Frank Sinatra face furrowed with concentration. Yes, I thought, it is a good thing: too long we have been imposing our utilitarian Christianity on the heathen; now let us have Buddhist missionaries in Chicago — perhaps the silence would do us good.

BONSAI

Japan is haunted by its forests. Even in squalid industrial centers, on hillsides overlooking soot-blackened factory towns where workers toil joylessly amidst the hellish clanging of machines, there are ancient forests surrounding temples and shrines, luxuriant and green-shadowed places still inhabited by the gods. Sometimes along the roadside you come across a solitary tree with gaping silver wounds, enclosed by a low wooden fence. Such a tree is being honored by the peasants nearby. I have no difficulty in accepting such a practice, for as a child I too secretly paid homage to an ancient gutted oak whose roots clung tenaciously to the earth like the boney fingers of a miser scooping up his gold. So it was that countless times I would pause during a visit to a Shinto shrine or a Buddhist temple to admire some striking group of trees posturing together like a chorus of actors in a tragic play. How natural that in a country like Japan where art, religion and simple living are so interwoven as to be practically indistinguishable one from the other, that these tree ghosts should be brought into the home to be contemplated in private.

The art of *bonsai* (*bon*, meaning vase; and *sai*, meaning culture) is an ancient art which was imported from China centuries ago, probably during the Tong dynasty; but like so many of the arts imported from China, the art of *bonsai* has

undergone a strange transformation. Perhaps Japan's unique island situation is responsible for this transformation, or perhaps it is the fact that in Japan human life is constantly confronted with unexpected disasters — devastating fires, earthquakes, and typhoons. Whatever the reason (and many might be cited) there is no more typical expression of the Japanese soul than the *bonsai* art as it is understood and appreciated by the Japanese themselves. Rare indeed is that household, be it the treasure-filled mansion of a wealthy prince or the grimy hovel of a humble city worker, where there is not at least one *bonsai* occupying the place of honor in a room otherwise almost completely void of decoration, its branches frozen in the act of benediction.

Westerners often speak of the *bonsai* as « dwarf trees », but this is not an accurate description. True enough, the growth of a *bonsai* has been arrested, but even this fact doesn't justify its being compared to a dwarf which is after all a freak. More appropriately a *bonsai* might be compared to a work of classical sculpture, for there is in its conception the same odd mixture of religious idealism and fanatical concern for formal values. Never never, for example, must a *bonsai* evidence the slightest trace of artifice — it must be at once a tree and the description of a tree: substance and shadow. That intangible quality which the Japanese look for in every good *bonsai*, *sabi* (a word virtually untranslatable but which denotes that spiritual uniqueness which gives each tree its particular poetry) can only be imparted after years and years of delicate experimentation.

Sabi has to do with the shape of the branches, their length and breadth in relationship to the trunk; the direction in which the upper branches are pointing (they must not for example, give the appearance of striving toward the sky with insatiable ambition, but should evidence a kind of philosophic humility before nature; resignation as well as indomitable courage — qualities which the Japanese greatly admire in human beings); and the silhouette which, though asymmetrical, should reflect the divine equilibrium of nature. It must never appear to be stunted or deformed, but must have the noble proportions of a solitary tree standing courageous and una-

fraid before the violent caprices of nature. This is the reason why the most popular *bonsai* are those with gnarled and twisted trunks and the same tortured lines that scrub pine have on rocky, storm battered coasts. Equally important to the general aesthetic design are the roots which must be left partly exposed, convulsive in their strength, as if to dramatise the tree's attachment to the earth. And yet at the same time the *bonsai* should embody the feminine side of nature, the timeless stillness of moonlit nights, the tranquillity which both precedes and follows violent storms; it must be a monument to the continuity of life — birth, sleep and rebirth; and, though small enough to place on a tiny table (most are less than a foot high, though some are somewhat larger), it must give the feeling of limitless space, must itself be a landscape.

As with so many other aspects of Japanese culture, we visitors from the West become intrigued with *bonsai* for purely external reasons. We find them « charming » and « cute, » and, quite understandingly, given the numbing materialism of our age, fail to grasp the subtle spiritual values which underly their creation. For us — to cite one example — one of the main reasons for keeping a similar potted plant would be the delight of seeing it burst into flower. But such is not the case with the Japanese. Though many *bonsai* are fruit-bearing trees which burst out with blossoms every spring, this blossoming is considered only one aspect of its beauty. For the true *bonsai* must reveal its poetry in all seasons — in joyous sunlight as in the gloom of a winter dawn. Its flowering is only an incident in this cycle of its growth.

Even the tray it has been placed in is chosen with the most meticulous care. It must, for example, be just the right depth. If it is too deep, the roots will get too much nourishment and the branches outgrow the delicately balanced proportions. To prevent the roots from rotting, there must be holes in the bottom of the tray so that excess moisture can drain off. Whether the tray is to be long, rectangular, or elliptical depends on which shape better enhances the spiritual whole, and the color must compliment the warm skin-like tones of the bark. Unglazed surfaces in the colors of nature — grey-browns, smoke-yellows and greens — are preferred, and

the lines must be rigorously simple. In the winter the tree is removed from its tray and placed in the earth to sleep. In the springtime it is taken from the earth again and secret fertilizers are mixed with the soil in the tray, delicate operations performed on the roots, and once again, as green shoots start budding on the tips of the branches, the never ending ritual of pruning begins.

Altogether, *bonsai* is a forbidding and all-consuming art, one that requires patience, genius, and, above all, compassion. Is it any wonder then that its practitioners — those sly, themselves tree-like, gardeners whose secretive and monosyllabic talk conceals a vast accumulation of lore and techniques jealously guarded from one another and passed down through the centuries from father to son — are venerated in Japan as artists and philosophers worthy of the highest respect.

Partly by chance, I went with M. to visit the monthly *bonsai* market in Tokyo. It was again one of those dismal rainy days which make Tokyo seem like a sprawling frontier town inhabited by muffled apparitions skurrying about suspiciously to get off the dangerous streets. It was bitterly cold. Winter showed no signs of letting up, yet, as soon as we turned the corner and entered the street where the market was located, we were confronted with row after row of potted trees, extending the whole length of the block, many of them covered with blossoms like pink moths swarming over a man's arm.

Although I had seen *bonsai* many times before, in private homes and in tea houses, I had never seen so many of them in one place before, and for nearly an hour we walked up and down the street enchanted, as much by the quiet unassuming dignity of the gardeners as by the trees.

One of the gardeners especially caught my attention. He was an old man with a boney ascetic face and the steady haunting gaze of a hungry child. Dressed shabbily in a faded *hopi* coat and wearing straw sandals in spite of the cold, he stood motionless beside his display, his arms hanging limp at his side. The other gardeners were calling out shrilly to the passers-by, but this one seemed to have little interest in

selling his trees spread out on the sidewalk around him like a decimated forest. Most of them were small trees, hardly more than twigs placed in pots, but there was one — a plum tree with twin trunks and sensuous knotted branches that seemed to reach out and embrace itself like the old man and his wife in the legend who meet again after death — which immediately I set eyes on it filled me with a fever of possession.

Its price was twelve thousand *yen*, more money than I had to spend those last days in Japan; yet, though I sensed or imagined — it makes no difference since my guilt remains the same — that the old man's sadness was the sadness of separating himself from a tree he had watched over since childhood (it was sixty years old, while the gardener was nearing sixty-five). I nevertheless persuaded M. to buy it for himself and allow me to keep it in my room in the Tokyo Hotel for the two or three days that were left before my departure for Rome.

Even in those squalid surroundings M.'s tree began to possess me. Working late at night at my table with only a single lamp burning, or waking at dawn while the darkness dissolved to grey, I could feel its presence close to me, more like a human than a tree. As the days passed I realized that I could never leave it behind, and from the moment I boarded the plane I watched over it with a passion I shall never surpass, though one day I should have a child of my own. I made a nuisance of myself with the airplane hostess by insisting that the tree occupy the seat next to mine; I stared down suspicious custom officials in five countries; I accepted the admiring smiles of homesick Japanese nationals in Siam with fatherly condescension; and in the hellish tropical heat of Bangkok, when the tree seemed to wilt, I covered it with a dampened towel.

How proud I was to have it among the familiar things in my room! How grateful those first weeks after my return that it flourished in the cool Roman spring! And yet, when the larvae came, spreading a malignant web over the branches, selecting the most tender undefended buds to feed on, I had a premonition of the end and recognized my guilt. At the

university the professors assured me that all would go well, and dutifully I sprayed the branches with the chemicals they gave me. But still I felt no peace. For so human had the tree become in my imagination that I could not convince myself that its ailment was physical, that larvae and lice could harm those sturdy branches.

But now I am afraid that my *bonsai* is dying. Such a tree cannot endure away from the loving care of its creator, my friends in Tokyo warned. Perhaps it is the heat, or the water, or something I failed to do — I no longer care for I am resigned. When my wife urges me to take it back to the university, I lose my temper and abuse her with words I don't mean. I hope against hope that somehow life still persists in those roots. But the days pass, and even as I write this, what was once the embrace of ghostly lovers has become the macabre clutching of skeletons, the staid posturing of Death.

JANE MAYHALL

FEVER AND CHILL

Mrs. Crutchfield called me through a corridor of black roses. Our two houses on the block were exactly the same; except that hers, instead of being arranged into the large box-like rooms that were so stylish in Louisville, had been cut up into hallways and lined with dark-figured wallpaper. Wherever you turned, there was always another small parlor, or an adjacent vestibule, fancifully hung with a dark rosaceous flora, subterranean with leaves and strange heavy patterns. Coming into her house, I always felt that I was entering some deep German forest without sunlight, but reflecting its own sense of greens, purples and browns, once your eyes were accustomed to the gloom.

My visits may have appeared to be routine, those of a polite little girl paying respects to a very old lady. But the facts were more devious, and fraught with queer passion. I was fascinated and drawn to the home of Mrs. Crutchfield as to something that was not, but perhaps should have been, forbidden. I tiptoed into its shadows and aromas, with the always mysterious feeling of danger near at hand. Outside, the house was not unusual, white clapboard and red corrugated tin roof. But inside, it was a maze of unpredictable parts, with its long window drapes and cloudy amber lamps, black cedar cabinets and twin brocaded sofas, not to mention the always enigmatic presence of a few dignified cats strolling self-possessedly through the narrow doorways. In terms yet

undiscovered, or none that I could understand, I sensed there some alluring kind of freedom.

As I came into the room, Mrs. Crutchfield sat in the corner on a straight-backed chair. She never appeared to want comfort, softness and ease. She was too intense for any cushioning, and would have been suffocated by the normal pleasures that most old women thought they deserved. No, she sat taut as a wire, leaning forward with undisguised anticipation, and could scarcely wait until I got through the door. Then, she would greet me with some down-to-earth question, like: « Do I look as if I've been crying? » or « What does the color, yellow, remind you of? »

I always answered her truthfully, after a hard-thinking pause. If her cheeks were a little stained under the rice-powder she used, I admitted that I could still see tears. As for her trick of cross-examining me on my feelings about colors, I never ceased to explore their interesting possibilities. Blue made me think of a bathroom, or Jesus in big church windows. Yellow was, for some reason, an enemy color. Mrs. Crutchfield said that she had once felt the same, but had changed her mind in recent times. She could now see more advantage to yellow, a good bright color, say, if you wanted to use it for things like summer flower pots, or a silk ribbon on a black cat's neck. This point of view seemed intelligible to me. And as for mine, dredged up so often by my own fumbling and awkward sincerity, she accepted it whole. And devoted much time to my opinions.

At this period, Mrs. Crutchfield was seventy-five years old, and I had just reached the age of nine. Sometimes, as if I might be put off by the difference in our years, which I was not, she assured me at length that we had a great deal in common. And told me how it had all begun.

Our friendship, she claimed, could be traced back to the day that I was born, a rainy morning in late September. It was on that day that her only daughter, already of spinster age, was marrying a Protestant (a Methodist, to be exact) a man not of Mrs. Crutchfield's choice, and certainly having none of her consent. Mrs. Crutchfield, as I had always known, was Catholic, not deeply so, but one of stubborn and proud convictions. The day then that her disobedient daughter went

off with wedding bells in her ears, I was squalling my first dissonant cries in the front bedroom next door.

But on hearing these sounds, Mrs. Crutchfield had taken hope. Her old world had vanished, and I was the new one to come. It wasn't that I was to be a second child to her, but rather a first companion. Her husband was dead, he had left a small sum for necessities but not comforts, and they never had any friends between them. Her daughter had eloped; it was I now who had inherited her true friendship, having been born next to a house where I was needed.

Scarcely had we met (Mrs. Crutchfield often told me) but she realized the strange current of understanding that ran between us. It was an odd introduction. I was six weeks old, a jiggling infant in my mother's shy arms; we had come out for a little airing at the end of the day, going about the backyard to take a last breath before sundown. It was in November's dark dying weather, the sky was low and clouded; the thick leaves crunched at my mother's soft step. She paused, leaned over the white-washed plank fence, and set me (swathed in wool) at the crook of her arm. Then she cordially called Mrs. Crutchfield over to make my acquaintance.

« This is Henrietta, » said my mother. « Why don't you come on over, and say howdy. »

Mrs. Crutchfield stood on her backsteps, then came down carefully, walking straight-necked to the fence. She moved with a certain hauteur, punctuating her steps with the tap of a dog-headed cane. She was not either crippled or feeble, but she liked a staff at her side.

There she stood before us, eyeing me out from under her enormous red sunbonnet, appearing (I suppose) at that gray, light-ebbing hour, both rhapsodic and grotesque. With her rimless octagonal glasses set astride a powerful projecting nose, her smooth skin showing scarcely any old-age wrinkles, the gulches and planes of her face made an expressionless and bleak terrain. Her countenance resembled, perhaps more than anything else, some extravagant toy-mask invented for scaring children.

But I was, apparently, quite unafraid.

And when Mrs. Crutchfield said, « Well, I'm mighty pleased to meet her, » I simply stared back, and would have

spoken if I could have. In fact, so intelligent did I appear, with sharp inquisitive black eyes, it was as if all the grown-up thoughts in the world were locked inside that deceptive baby skull. And when she reached over to take me, I seemed perfectly glad to be hoisted aloft. I sat at her shoulder, like some intelligent cat that wanted neither coddling nor cooing.

As time went on, Mrs. Crutchfield's methods of praise had a strong influence. When I heard her tell my mother that I was « independent, » « bad-tempered, » or « smart, » I tried my best to approximate the act. Also, I was careful not to express too much appreciation for the presents that she gave. I wanted to keep these offerings uncontaminated by any sentiment; in some way Mrs. Crutchfield had indicated that this was her wish, I don't know exactly how. But the number of gifts was stupendous, and silence became after awhile, I suppose, the most telling and honest response. After the first flurry of silver rings, ivory combs and brushes, blankets and embroidered sheets, there came a second round when I was about seven years old. They were more expensive items, foreign trinkets, little jewelled bracelets, rubber-roller skates, books and elaborate games.

Sometimes my mother began to worry at the amount and kinds of presents. She knew that Mrs. Crutchfield was not rich, why she scarcely got along! For most of her meals, she ate boiled bacon rinds and greens (we could smell the sulphureous odors every night across the lawn) and she wore only the most ancient black dresses which she must have had for the past twenty-five years. My mother said that it did not « seem right. » And the thought that the gifts might have cost Mrs. Crutchfield some real deprivations gave my parents a rather bad conscience. As I grew older, in fact, they began to distrust her over-indulgent tactics. Once, my father thought to speak of it out loud.

It was on my ninth birthday, when Mrs. Crutchfield had given me a gold-plated bird whistle with two tiny emerald eyes. I heard my father talking out in the kitchen.

« Do you know, » he said to my mother, « do you know what that old lady is trying to do? She's trying to buy the love of a child. »

My mother did not speak, but I knew that she took

seriously my father's high-flown rhetoric. He worked hard on a job at the post office all day, and had little occasion to philosophize. When he did, she always listened.

« Do you really think so? » her voice was somewhat sober. « I never thought of it that way. »

« Of course, » said my father. « Why else would she do it? And when you consider it now, it's a mighty queer thing. The way she acts, and all that. And living over there by herself. »

« Oh, » my mother's tone changed, he had touched at a point where her sympathy could work. « I don't know about that. She's such a pathetic old creature. I really pity her. And I don't think she does any harm. »

« Maybe, » said my father, « she doesn't do any harm. But she's certainly making a mistake. One thing I always believe — » he maintained stoutly, « you can't buy the love of a child. »

I don't know if the repetition of this statement slackened my mother's interest, but the conversation drifted on to something else.

Meanwhile, I went off, feeling slightly relieved. I was not certain why. But there was a cast to their words that put me on guard. Also, what had they meant? My father's allusion to *love*, and my mother's own casual statement of *pity* seemed fantastical and out of context. Both of these words seemed too remote and foolish to attach to anything that I knew about. In my clear-headed child's world, I recognized only the voluptuous and physical sensations as having the right to deal with feelings.

I clomped up onto Mrs. Crutchfield's front porch. The broken porch-swing dangled from its chains, a stone flower urn stood cracked and empty by the door. Scarcely knocking, I pushed the rusty screen open (it stayed up, even in the dead of winter) and walked in.

« Is that you, Henrietta? » I heard her voice, with its undulant southern whine, « Is that you now? » sounding through the black-rosed corridor. My ribs grew hard with excitement.

Into the oily darkness, past the glint of an unused gas-lamp, I saw the crack that was her door. The atmosphere was

laden with the smell of cats, pork greens and holy incense. I paused, to draw a deep breath. I loved it there, whatever it was — some general and sinister air of wholesome unreality.

In that hall, no longer was I a little girl, as my parents thought of me. Nor was I what the other children believed me to be, either. In the dark hall, I was alone, enormous, potential. I was, in fact, a person. And in my secret mind, I foresaw a wonderful wicked world of unearned gifts and prizes. I was totally free, contemptuous and fulfilled, and keyed up to exert the best behavior.

As I walked into the room, daylight pleaded through the dark curtains. Mrs. Crutchfield sat in the corner by herself. She leaned forward slightly, and said nothing for the moment. I climbed up to my usual place, and arranged myself on the sofa, anticipating the crafty conversation, such as Mrs. Crutchfield liked to employ. Her mind was a masterful spider, that drew me into the web of its many-sided questions. I waited, alert and receptive.

«Do you think,» she paused, and seemed to consider, «do you think, Henrietta, that I ought to have gotten married? Now, tell me —» this was her inquiry for the day, «what do you think of people who get married?»

I sat, cross-legged on the sofa, and looked across the room into her green-flecked bronze eyes. Behind the glasses, I could not always tell if the question was to be taken as a joke, or seriously. If it was to be serious, then I was to remember all the trouble that had befallen since her own matrimonial step. I knew that she had once lived at Cane Run, Kentucky, a beautiful chestnut-haired girl with a beau. She had worn fine cotton-print dresses, had climbed fences and «spooned.» But the beau had run away, and never come back again — probably gone off to marry a rich widow. She, she had, in her turn, found Mr. Crutchfield at the time. She had married him, and hoped for the best.

But it was Mr. Crutchfield, I knew, with his brown creaking boots and sly tedious ways, who had finally obstructed the course of her life. He had been a bald and portly man, with a tobacco-stained moustache, who liked elderberry wine, and was always betting on the horses. Mrs. Crutchfield had showed me several pictures of Mr. Crutchfield, usually

accompanied by a horse, and never by herself. He wore stand-out riding pants, and a tight-fitting « gentleman's coat. » With his high, melon-shaped brow and wide expectant eyes, I could not tell what he was like. But, as Mrs. Crutchfield described her late husband, he never kept a steady job and was always underfoot. In the parlor, he was like a big table or chair that got in her way, whenever she wanted to move. And now that he was dead, she was too old to change her life. Also, as well I knew, her daughter had never been any help. Everything *she* did was simply out of spite, even to the picking of a husband.

« If she had really cared for that man, » Mrs. Crutchfield's vivid thoughts could pour without warning into another conduit, « if she had really cared for that Methodist man, then I could forgive. »

I nodded, realizing that I myself was a Protestant. But there was never any trouble because of it. However, with the daughter, it was different.

« She did not care for that man, » Mrs. Crutchfield spoke thoughtfully, « and does not even now. It's spite for him, Henrietta. And spite for me, I'm saying. And that's what I got for my troubles. »

I listened to her speak, without astonishment, rapt in the powers of subtlety. That people could do hurt to each other for so inconceivable and fine a cause (just out of spite!) struck me as particularly convincing. The windows of Mrs. Crutchfield's thoughts seemed to open out more and more on secret landscapes, the kind of ideas that no one else ever mentioned. It was like a dark within dark, drafty haunted gardens, wherein would be found the ultimate and murderous fact. I saw it through all of her life, a whole genealogy of wrong-doing about her, and she in the midst of it, alone. I listened, and reacted with fever and chill. And such was my excitement, I never doubted a word that she said. Together, we could understand the necessity of vigilance in the world, a world which was so dangerous and self-willed, and was against you from the start. You could never trust anyone (I was pleased to think that was true, a dramatic arrangement of forces was set up, very much like a game with soldiers)

and you had to rely on your own good sense, to keep yourself going at last.

« You just keep your eye out, » Mrs. Crutchfield said meaningfully, « and you'll get along. Henrietta, I know *you're a one that will.* »

Her advice was flattering. As were her questions, no matter how gloomy the subject. So, when she asked me, now, my opinion of people who « got married, » I was more stimulated than depressed by the query. Besides, Mrs. Crutchfield's descriptions of her life, and the sadness of her lot (so graphically complete, with tattered photographs) were too rich and full of unexpected turns to be felt as morbid by a nine year old.

« What do you think now? » she said, « do you think I ought to have got hitched? » her voice made a dip of irony, I felt that she was testing me for a new answer.

« No ma'am, » I said, « I wouldn't. Not unless'n I wanted to. And maybe not even then. »

« What would you have done? »

« I'd rather go on, and be a garbage man. Or — a bricklayer. Or something — » my imagination soared, « something nobody even thought. »

She regarded me, inquisitively.

« You would? »

I nodded, with exaggerated conviction.

« Why? »

« Because — » I struggled to think of a reason, « that's the way I'd feel! I wouldn't care about anything else, that's *all.* »

Mrs. Crutchfield shook her head up and down slowly. I don't know whether I had sieved her own thoughts back to her, but her glasses were suddenly opaque and silver, and glimmered wisely in the dusk of the room. I sat, enthralled, sensing (in my excited and romantic way) some impalpable river of memories, rushing behind her large unspeaking face. I had, in fact, been so trained (by her, and by no one else) to consider all the logic of her life, the places where she had lived, and the people she used to know, my own spirited responses diminished to a kind of awe. Of course, the answer I had given was nonsensical and silly. But it touched her

with some contentment. She leaned back and seemed to relax, as if her thoughts were far away. Moments later, she lifted her head, and her expression seemed to twinkle.

« How about a bite of candy? » she asked.

« Wouldn't mind if I did, » I said primly.

Mrs. Crutchfield got up and went to the cedar cabinet, and drew out a paper bag of rock-crystal candy. She offered me some, and we sat chewing, in our separate, contemplative corners.

Sometimes, it seems to me that the real plot of our lives is like a primordial ooze. It comes through, drop by drop, as through pores of a muddy ground; from a thousand unknown places, it silently exudes. While, what we have noticed from day to day is only our own familiar habit, certain impressions and opinions, things that seem as steadfast and growing as everyday shrubs or trees. Then, all at once we are aware that the vista has changed. Something in the foliage has altered. Through the fine lacework of our thoughts, as through a configuration of leaves, we are aware of a new difference. What is it? is it color, or is it shape? Or is it in something else?

Whatever it is, some quality, some *thing* in the very roots of the atmosphere has transformed everything in sight. It goes neither quickly nor obviously. But it is something behind and under, seeping out drop by drop, as through a dense and hidden nature, the earthbound tangle of our feelings.

My friendship with Mrs. Crutchfield did not seem to change for awhile yet. Although I did not realize that we were already reaching the last year of our attachment. But I was eleven at the time; and it was just that year, we had begun to talk about our dreams.

I do not know why we had never discussed our dreams before, they were so much a part of the dark interior drama to which we had become addicted.

But perhaps I should mention here, if it is not already plain, that I was carrying in my mind a rather particular burden. It was this: in spite of the fact that I was a very eccentric child, still I was almost successful in keeping that

disability from the knowledge of other children. Outwardly, I was hoydenish and rough, athletic and inventive, and kept a sharp eye cocked for any look of suspicion that might come from my young cohorts. One of my dismal secrets was, for instance, that although I was a girl I could never stand to play with dolls. Not that I didn't care for babies and children; I thought them very nice. But I would rather play with books, and pretend that *they* were people, or pats and pans, or sticks of wood. At least, I had elected these myself.

But this point of view I literally concealed from other children. In frantic little packs, we played most of our games outside, in alleys and coalsheds. We sneaked through rickety half-demolished houses, crawled on our stomachs under teetering logs in the lumberyard, or sometimes ran off to climb up the trestles of the old Indiana bridge. These were privileges denied to girls, my companions were as afraid as I was; but I was a firm oppressive conscience. I shamed and dared them to do these things, and usually led the way.

This was, of course, all a terrible back-breaking ruse. But I felt that none of those dainty little females, or the small boys either, would catch on to the oddities of my character, if I outdistanced them in their own territory. I played myself to the bone, grew thin and hollow-eyed, and tried not to lose a trick. I am sure now (looking back) that none of my companions really liked me, but they were afraid not to seek me out. By some strange unspoken law, daily I was given the task of making up their games. I did so, a little monster of rigor; and they obeyed, with their uncommunicative and innocent mien. Did I imagine this? Perhaps, some of it. But, I recall myself — a frowning soot-eyed little girl, with features as anonymous as those of a foreign coin, which no one recognizes or even remembers. But I was in the queer position of enjoying some kind of strong and loveless popularity. And I accepted the honor for what it was worth.

In this way, I *was* like Mrs. Crutchfield. But her eccentricities were less concealed. The neighbors felt a grudging esteem; they thought that she dressed like «an old witch,» and probably ate «fish-meat for cats.»

These rumors may have filtered through the household; but, for me, only as something of passionate worth. With

Mrs. Crutchfield I seemed to share some honorable misanthropy, never defined or mentioned — and acceptable only to each other.

And so the talk about dreams had begun. It could be said that both Mrs. Crutchfield and I had nightmares, but it did not seem so to us. We liked to report them as they happened. I had dreams about God, whose great search-light fingers seared across the black sky. I had other large dreams too, of suns and moons in collision; I could almost hear the thunder and the crackling spit of lightning. And then, there were very simple ones, of myself picking flowers or walking to the grocery with my mother.

Mrs. Crutchfield was eager to hear what the latest chapter was, and had me tell my dreams over many times. She had no notion of science, and she related these higher thoughts, made out of sleep, to nothing but sheer adventure.

« I never heard the like! » she sometimes clasped her hands, « and then what happened after? »

She, herself, often dreamed of cold swans. They reminded her of the little ponds off in Cane Run, where she used to wander as a girl. There, she pursued them in her mind, were the snowy convolutions of vast and shimmering birds, floating on the white-mirrored lakes of her youth. Most of the scenes she encountered were glistening with ice, white wintry fields where she always walked, feeling sad. This was how her tears came when they did. She was not really unhappy, and there was no reason for me to commiserate. It was just as if she had heard some very sad song; she enjoyed how it made her feel.

With her sunbonnet off, she seemed more heavy-set, her head crowned with neat plaits of gray hair. Above the square glasses, her brow was white, unlined and marble-smooth. But I did not think often of how she appeared — I knew her mind so well. And she did not reveal her feelings by other than what she said. Or, if she seemed to, with tears or a sudden laugh, this struck me as an almost breath-taking art. I could not have explained it, but that is what I felt. For at the time it had come to this: Mrs. Crutchfield was my real playmate, and conversation was our game.

« Say it over again, » I would prompt from the corner.

« Do you really want me to? » she sat, with a big orange cat in her lap. She stroked its long tiger ears.

« Yes'm. That one's *good!* »

« Well, then — » she began the dream once more. I noticed that this time she had skillfully changed the beginning. But this was part of the proceedings, we liked to surprise each other. Although each of us knew, almost unerringly, where we had exaggerated or erased some detail — or if we were going truthfully deep.

Our thoughts were that close, and the summer was coming on. Hotbugs zoomed in the trees. Everyday, I could hardly wait to get to Mrs. Crutchfield's after lunch, to see what we would talk about. As I walked into the room, it was at the height of the sun, she sat in the shadows, tapping her nose with a palm-leaf fan.

« Seems hot in here? » she asked.

« Not very much, » I said.

« I'll open up the curtain, » she went to the window, and threw back the drape. The world outside seemed suddenly as stark as a newborn white egg shell.

« Oh, » I said, « put it back! It hurts my eyes. »

I liked the fresh air and sunshine, but preferred the half-dark when I was there. Mrs. Crutchfield seemed pleased. She slid the curtain back.

« I dreamed, » she said, « about the Devil last night. »

« What did he look like? » I asked.

« Oh, » she sat down, « he was a teeny little red light, that followed me all around. »

« Like a little red flashlight? »

« Yes. »

« It sounds like, » something conversational echoed in my mind, « It sounds like, » I said, « the play you saw at the Orpheum. You know, the one when you first came to Louisville. »

Mrs. Crutchfield was pleased by my total recall.

« That was Faust! » she said. « You remember *that?* I told you about that when you were just a tad. »

« Did you really dream about the Devil? » I asked.

« No, » she said. « But I *almost* did. There was something about it, the way everything was last night. »

« What? »

« I don't know. The way the wind was blowing, something all around. It made me kind of scarey. You feel that way? »

« I guess so, » I said. I was thinking about my own dream, and planning to tell about that. In the last two months, a great thing had happened, I had fallen in love. The object was an actor, a stern and handsome man. My bedroom wall was fairly plastered with his glossy Hollywood pictures. I saw his movies whenever I could; my parents did not seem to mind, they may not even have detected my feelings. He was near to middle-age (I think, almost thirty) with cold, light-colored eyes. His accent was tart and English, and he nearly always played the role of a detective or some suave and likeable villain. It was his stern and judicious air that put me into a besotted passion. I had thoughts about him, and hoped for meetings (although this hardly seemed probable, I never dwelt on that aspect) and spoke only rarely about him. However, the night before, by the sheer indulgence of reverie, imagining his eyes, beautifully brilliantined hair and adorable English-style ears, I had fallen into an exhausted slumber — and had, at last, managed to get his face into a dream.

It was not much of a dream. We had only been riding in a car, through a valley with some kind of fields. But his nearness was quite palpable, the rather haughty and famous charms, the wearied ironic smile which was directed straight at me! I woke up, feeling proud of the achievement, as if it had really been so.

I had mentioned him before to Mrs. Crutchfield, and she had always seemed half-way interested. To all other tales I told, she was an absorbed and listening spirit. However, I had supposed, with a rather discomfited feeling, that such a passionate revelation seemed to her childish. To be in love with a movie star! put me on a par with all other nitwit children. It was difficult to explain that *he* was not like any other actor. Most of the little girls I knew, if they were movie fans, were crazy about cowboys and swimmers. They could talk of nothing else but their curly-headed dummies, and lay in glider-swings all day, eating candy, singing popular songs and

fingering stickily through old movie magazines. But about my actor, I was secretive. I was ardent, fierce and obsessed, and studied up on his habits only when I was alone. I knew that he played tennis, had a wife and two children, and liked to raise dogs at his villa. Once I saw him in a movie, in which he wore a black moustache. I prevailed upon my mother to buy me some false whiskers, and sported them for a week — until the glue wore off. This mild performance was looked upon as a rather idiotic « prank. » And only I knew that it had sprung from the very marrow of devotion.

As I recounted my dream to Mrs. Crutchfield now, I was carried away and began to speak with a stutter. My eyelids burned, my voice started to tremble. Some terrible kind of yearning to give proof of myself, and to identify my thoughts with the actor, made me sound rather wild. It was the first time I had ever really given vent to such excited and outdoor emotions. I talked on, describing the dream, remembering the actor poignantly, his stern and haggard eyes. How handsome he had been! If he were dying, I'd save him.

Mrs. Crutchfield sat very still, without speaking. Once in awhile, she lifted the palm-leaf fan to blow back a wisp of hair. She was disturbed, somehow, I felt. And I was vaguely aware that her face had suddenly snapped shut.

I was not sure of this at first, but some uneasiness had set in. Mrs. Crutchfield seemed fidgety and strange. And when I had finished my rather panting remarks, she spoke in a tone I had not heard her use before.

« I hope, » she said, « you'll be very happy. When's the wedding to be? »

There was such an edge of sarcasm in her voice, I looked up, feeling startled. She had never used that voice before, never to me.

« W-what —? I don't know. » I bit my lip and floundered. « I wasn't meaning anything about that. I was, you know, just talking. »

« Mighty serious talk, sounds to me. Does your mother know about it? »

« My mother! » I was dumbfounded. « Why should she know? »

Mrs. Crutchfield sniffed.

« When people talk like you do, it sounds mighty serious. »

I sat, huddled in my corner. Something inexplicable had happened, she had dashed cold water on my feelings. I had been jerked out of enchantment, and did not know what to think. Why on earth had I told it? Suddenly, I felt exposed and cheap.

Out of my dusty pocket, I excavated an old skate-key. And began nervously to bite at the metal.

« Don't do that, » said Mrs. Crutchfield, « you'll ruin your teeth. »

I put the key away. Presently, I spoke, in a low uncertain voice.

« But, I didn't mean — » What had I not meant? It was some line between reality and feeling that had been doubted. Some visionary make-believe had been trapped and taken apart, corrupted and demeaned. But how? My thoughts strove to make sense of it all. « It was just — » my utterance seemed confused, « it was just a dream I was saying. »

Mrs. Crutchfield did not reply. The orange cat, who had been sleeping on the cat-pallet got up and gave a yawn, and padded out toward the rear of the house. Mrs. Crutchfield looked somberly after the beast.

It was not that she had not believed my dream, or that what I had said was not important. It was not that. But I could not fathom her mood. Some door had been closed between us, and I felt a sudden tender-hearted desire to cry. Why had she sounded that way? What was it about? Something had happened, I knew.

Restlessly, I worked myself forward on the sofa. Mrs. Crutchfield glanced up.

« Well, I just, » she said, « wish you luck. I wish you luck, that's all. »

I was too bewildered to reply. The time went dragging on. Then, suddenly the afternoon paper arrived, and Mrs. Crutchfield and I both fell back into our usual habit of looking at the daily funnies. There were two sections, I lay on my stomach on the floor looking at one, while she read hers, squinting by the window. We exchanged pages when we had finished, and silently read through the other part. Before

I left, Mrs. Crutchfield prevailed upon me to take a handful of gumdrops. I carried them, unpleasantly melting through my fingers. When I got home, I put them away in a dressing table drawer — and left them there, until they were too stale to be eaten.

The next days were alive with molecules of heat. The nights were scarcely different, the Ohio Valley was always overladen with an oppressive humidity throughout the whole of summer. Mrs. Crutchfield had devised a way of keeping cool; at night she soaked sheets in cold water, and slept in her bed in her nightgown, wrapped in the wet linen. In awhile, she had caught a bad cold, and I went everyday to take her some cough medicine, or a lemon drink from my mother.

Mrs. Crutchfield looked up from her cot, which she had arranged in the kitchen to be near the food supply.

« If I die, » she said, « you can have the little statue on the mantle. »

I did not know what to say. The statue was a favorite, a little shepherd boy made of china; the workmanship was expensive, the whorls of brown-painted hair, the delicate eyes and nose. It had been a wedding present from her New Orleans aunt, nearly fifty years ago. I had never thought of wanting it, the statue belonged to Mrs. Crutchfield. I saw it as eternally sitting on her mantle.

« Well — » I was unsure and thoughtful, mulling the idea over.

« What's the matter? » she said, « don't you like my good statue? You used to think it was all right. »

« Oh yes'm, I like it. I like it just fine. »

« Well, take it, » she said. « Take it, take it, *take it!* » She turned her eyes up, in a melancholy way. « After I'm gone, » she said.

I stared, with a feeling of anxiety, and yet of slight disbelief. Was she really so very sick? I did not want the statue, I didn't want anything. A vague recollection crept into my thoughts, I remembered all the toys she had given. They were irrefutably mine, each one I knew; and I felt, all at once, a sick lust of ownership. They were mine, I had played

with them. A dull sense of guilt clamped down on my mind, my tongue was heavy, leaden.

« But I guess, » Mrs. Crutchfield was saying, « nobody will care about that. »

« About what? » I managed to say.

« About when I'm dead and gone. And the worms all eat me up. »

The idea seemed so ludicrous and horrific, I could only gasp in reply.

Mrs. Crutchfield pushed herself up with one elbow, and put her chin in her hand.

« You won't care, I'm sure! » She regarded me, with a wily mocking look.

« Yes, I will. I will so, » I exclaimed. What else could I say? She had pounced on my sense of obligation. Some childish and hurt noise was wrung from my heart. It sounded a little like « *unh!* »

Mrs. Crutchfield did not acknowledge the wound. She only continued to stare, and lay back slowly on her pillow.

« No, you won't, » she said, with dark satisfaction. « But that's all right with me. It's all right with me. I can take care of myself. »

I did not speak, trying to get my bearings. Mrs. Crutchfield lay, covered with a ragged spread, her slippered toes sticking out at the bottom of the cot. She wore a long-sleeved knit sweater, and a towel wrapped around her throat. As she lay there looking at the ceiling, she seemed to breathe more heavily, with an affected, melodramatic vigor.

She turned her head sidewise, toward me.

« You're acting mighty quiet, today. »

I did not answer.

« How's your actor-friend getting along? »

My cheeks burned.

« He's not, » I said, « a friend. »

« What is he, then? » she said. « What is he then, I'd like to know? »

My hands went slightly cold. Until then, I had avoided thinking about the subject. Although my loyalty to him was as strong as ever, I wanted to keep away from any blight of further questions. I gave a faint gulp, trying not to explain.

« Why — why, just nothing, » I said. « Just somebody in the movies, that's all. »

Mrs. Crutchfield did not respond, and my feelings grew more agitated. Vaguely, I felt that I had fallen on the wrong side of a joke. But what had I done to cause it? I sat in the dim light of the kitchen, trying to think of an idea that would clear everything up.

But Mrs. Crutchfield lay rigid, her mouth drawn in the compressed white of her face. Her whole aspect seemed to have thinned to a look of accusation.

« What I hear, » she said, « what I hear — he's a married man! And even has two children. »

I was wrathful, and appalled.

« I told you that, » I said. « I told you it, when we talked. »

She crossed her hands on her chest.

« The Bible says it's wrong. How you could love a married man — it's a crime and a mortal sin. That's what the Bible says. »

I was rueful, silent, unable to say a word.

« Of course, » she said, « that's what us Catholics believe. But you might see it different. Being's as you're a *Protestant*. »

I sat there, stunned. It was a final assault on my feelings. I had never been blamed for my religion, and had scarcely been aware of its existence. I had always liked to see evidences of Mrs. Crutchfield's church, the little gold-sprinkled Bible pictures, and the penance candles in a cup of ruby glass (there was one now, sitting on the kitchen table). I had never thought of what it meant, one way or the other. But as she lay there now, regarding me with such an angry, pleading look, I did not know what to do.

For the rest of the afternoon I played alone, climbing the plum tree in my backyard. The trunk was hard and stocky, with a delicate knotted bark. It was easy to ascend, I went up branch by branch with a vehement, aimless leaping. I could not bear to remain still; my thoughts were dull and joyless, as if something had sucked them dry.

I sat rocking on the top-most bough, remarking the shiplike sway of the tree. When I let my mind wander, tiny patterns of self-incrimination began to form, detached phrases

like odd-shaped clouds, feelings and ideas that were striving to come together, to make some awful sense against me.

I brushed my hand across my eyes, trying to wave the sensation off. Sitting in the top of the tree, I wanted only to look out at the fading, empty sky — to be away, and to never find myself again.

On the days that followed, I avoided going to see Mrs. Crutchfield, although I did not intend to be neglectful. But I felt a queer reluctance, and began to spend a great deal of my time down at the neighborhood playground. I was intent on every kind of game. I played hopscotch, baseball and endless rounds of rummy. My companions multiplied, we roved the park in gangs. And I came home every day, tired and completely worn out. But I was busy most of the time.

On the next Monday after, my mother gave me unexpected news. On that afternoon, she stopped me at the doorway, just as I was coming in. Her face, I noted, had worked up to a look of studied calm. It was an expression that I recognized, as one denoting serious event.

After a brief hesitation, she told me. She said that during the morning, Mrs. Crutchfield had suffered some kind of *stroke*.

And she added that, considering the circumstances, I ought not to go visit for awhile.

The fact was that I had not been to visit for a long while, it may even have been a week. But my mother had been too occupied with other things to notice. And now she bustled about, made some tapioca, and carried it over to Mrs. Crutchfield's house in a napkin-covered dish.

When she returned, she spoke to my father. She said that the « poor old thing » was not doing so very well. The priest and the doctor were there. And it was just a matter of time.

The details, I knew, were not meant for my ears. But I listened, anyway.

« Is that so? » replied my father. « Well, it seems too bad. But I guess you could have expected it, after all. These things happen, you know. »

« That's true, » said my mother. « Still, it always seems hard. Especially if you're around, and have to see it. »

I stayed by the window (I did not know why) and in the rose-pierced light of dusk, I could make out faintly the jugged weatherboarding of Mrs. Crutchfield's house. I felt detached and observant, and as if nothing that I saw was in any way connected with me. A permanent matter-of-factness seemed to have settled on everything.

The next day, I returned to the playground. When I came back, around noon, my mother called me in. She said she had something « important » to tell me. I knew what it was, before she spoke, my heart scarcely changing its beat. Mrs. Crutchfield was dead, I knew what it was; I only had to stand there and hear it.

But for one instant, as my mother talked, her tone seemed inappropriate to my feeling. Mrs. Crutchfield was dead, I realized that. But the way my mother looked at me, and her sympathetic voice, made me feel that she did not understand — how unaffected by the news I really was.

Mrs. Crutchfield was buried from her daughter's neighborhood. The funeral took place somewhere in the East End of town. Two days later, the furniture was taken off in a truck, the black cedar cabinets and two brocaded sofas. The animal rescue league had come to claim the cats; systematically and with scarcely a ripple, Mrs. Crutchfield's house was emptied of its possessions. A week later, the daughter and her husband came down to pack up the final arrears. They loaded their car with packages and boxes, I saw them come out the front door. The daughter was a brisk efficient-looking woman, her brown hair was matted with gray. She strapped on the boxes, with cable and cord; and they drove off without looking back.

Yet, even after they had gone, it seemed to me that nothing was over. I felt suspended and impassive. Persistently, my thoughts strayed back to the house, to the porch windows and all the doors locked. The weather turned cool, and in the evening I saw the half-darkened panes which seemed newly washed and shining. The shining glass-paned front door, without curtains or lights, was like a sheet of still water. Mrs. Crutchfield was dead, I realized that. But to everything,

I felt a curious and patient indifference. The house was dismantled, I went by every day. My feelings were cold and untouched.

However, two months later at the beginning of October, I happened to carry some library books up to my room. As I put them down on the table, I caught sight of something I had almost forgotten. It was the glossy surface of a movie photograph. The day that Mrs. Crutchfield had died, I had taken all the pictures down, and put them under a pile of magazines. They had not been moved since then, one was sticking out, with the others all stacked underneath.

But as I saw the shameful photographs, my heart made a sudden recoil. I stood there, tense and trembling, my cheeks suffused and hot. In a terrible vividness, I remembered her as if she were still alive. I recalled how she looked, and how she had deliberately misunderstood me that day when I told of my crush on the actor. Suddenly, I thought of her clearly, and she seemed real to me, her black rumpled dress, and the white face against the dark. I saw how she leaned forward, when I walked into the room — her large bonneted head, and the sound of her voice.

My anguished breath came, in a terrible, bitter ache. Oh, why had she been mad at me, like she was that day? Why had she been mad, and not forgiven at all? Why did she do it, and treat me like that? What was the matter? What had I done? Why had she blamed me when I told about the actor? Why was she so mad at me?

My feelings were agonized, bitter, rushing. Why did she do it, and treat me like that? I felt I did not understand. But all the time, I knew that I did.

EDITH SHIFFERT

MYTH

(While thinking of Cocteau and Mallarmé)

I

*Here on a northern day the lake's mirror, Orpheus
singing over my shoulder, his two passions
life and death waiting to listen a moment
beside my face on the water, reflected hemlocks.*

*Branches accumulate a sound of flight
as fog comes in with thickness, beaten feathers
rippling our water images to one
held up from drowning by the wings of Heurtebise,
silver angel of love and death who never heard the played flute
calling us in and out of overlapped waves.*

*He lifts us tenderly to the sky of the lake's depths
under his shadow of immortality, we forever mortal, dying;
under the shafted maze of air's fog, the water,
out of the cut bamboo or the beaten silver,
sounding as these aired boughs disturbing the clouded water,
hiding us the lost, the sunken, Eurydice.*

II

*Priestess and goddess of the cherry tree
 while it blooms, but not after,
 who sweeps up petals and their shadows?
 And what can he do with them?
 Numb the senses into leaves rolling up,
 emotions back into tight buds,
 there will still be a wind tossing branches
 and times when the sun's fire is stolen for roots.
 God and priest of the fruiting tree,
 the black and golden cherries of tomorrow
 come after the sweeping up of the wind's soft shaking down,
 after the winter and spring, in the hot summer.*

*The angel gone alone on the mountain,
 the tower he made for looking into stones,
 sees himself glowing in himself.
 He stands, a hermit, guardian of a jewel,
 ritual keeper, swinging an hourly lamp to and fro,
 chanting his wings away.
 Seeing in the diamond facets of his fetish
 his own strange face, human surrounded by humans,
 he hums on until it returns to being rock
 not precious, and the tower gone,
 the mountain fled for the orchard of the autumn
 deaf to the rush of wings above its brown leaves,
 the ground spattered with pits of cherries.*

OBJECTIVE

*I ravish with my hands
 round animals and flowers,
 angles of granite stone,
 air and water;
 to penetrate by touch*

*the sensual veil, reach
past fur and leaf to find
centricity in each.*

*The sifted yellow dust
upon a flowering,
a root's descended shaft
within dark earth, will bring
the green and branching spring,
the stem's upturning twist.*

*The air upon my wrist
is sensuous with light
and warmth. It burrows past
the nervous flesh, intrudes,
giving the shapeless foods
of space, the season's drift.*

*Past tone and temperature
it probes for what is pure
inside the burning bone;
the quality of form
with all its petals gone,
stiff as a berry's thorn
but yielding as rain.*

*Far in woods through leaves
the light falls green from rain
on slender bars of stalks,
and sieves beneath the ferns
a trembling-patterned stain
upon the green-deep walks.*

*Pale light upon the limbs
flows, unavoidable;
it comes and it is here
between old trees, new stems,
spreading like a fall
of water, smooth and clear.*

P O E M S

*It stays, an element
subdivided, bent,
within which I may give,
receive what I receive,
touching to infer
the ash beyond the fire,
that I may know my name
undecorated, plain.*

PATRICIA COOMBS

THE DEAD GREBE

*He is most beautiful,
Most beautifully his cry describes
The misted inlet and bare sky
From which he comes, wounded,
With grey feathers smooth as water.
Awkwardly upon the outlandish earth
He tried to walk, and failed.
A cry was all:
After the cry only blood soaking
The soft down upon his throat.
I held him in my hands beside the table—
Curious as a child to hold a wild thing
Captive, tamed by death.
Cold as the skin of serpents hung
The lobed and prehistoric feet,
Incredible upon the human palm.
Whatever stirs the shadows, shaking
The dark grass, troubles us
Who, with eyes turned back, offer bread
Yet have no refuge.
How beautiful the inhuman cry
At midnight in a sleeping house—
A common water-bird in grey winter dress,
Crying out through the unchanging wilderness,
As beautiful as Christ, and dead among us.*

ELEGY

*The giant from his great heart
Gone—O see! ballooned to heaven
In all his pale, monstrous flesh
Weighed down no more by death.
A giant step, and he is gone
Whose footsteps shivered in the leaves,
Shook the ground; earth
Rocks a moment, and is still.
The town crawls back upon the hill.*

*Even as I love my hands, I loved
This gross and gentle man: I was
Not his, nor was he mine—he lived,
I lived, as if tomorrow or next year
We would have time to talk. Grief
Struggles to be rid of us, and is
So strange that only he could comprehend,
Who lies blind in his white shroud
Beneath unveiled, Hebrew stone.*

JOHN FANDEL

ODE: OCTOBER

*It is the order of the seasons that conveys
their beauty; it is the commitment
to purpose, so that there is fulfillment
in the changes
Autumn arranges
for the beautiful to happen in ways
the beautiful happens, these same old different days.*

*Leaves fall, leaves falling, the falling leaves,
the fall of leaves in such color,
in such rainbows of splendor,
what can it mean
time after time seen
only as spectacle, a sees and believes
incident in the suns that time conceives.*

*I say it is more, it is more, I sing
it is more, and it is, it is
a meaning for watching this
brilliance of death,
as it catches my breath,
my thirtieth meditation of living, living,
loving toward the absolute beauty of the first giving.*

A THOUGHT ABOUT PASSIBLE LIMITS

*There is, perhaps, no contention
 worth contending
 with the aged convinced by age,
 with the young convinced by youth,
 or with those
 who only suppose;
 with the contender,
 the defender;
 for the rose
 in continuous repose,
 a moment of continual truth
 of itself, puts passion, puts rage
 into an ending
 eternity of themselves by its own suspension.*

A NOTE ON CREATION

*When euphoria is ended,
 it seems, for good— and you never know,
 it might be— suffering, residual,
 always ultimate and eventual,
 is usual. Unpretended.
 acceptance is the only way to go.*

*One has to prefer
 the knowing of the Saints, at last— at least
 one has to know the daily days'
 knowing. Sometimes a songbird plays
 one note over and over and over,
 then sings one note and creates the morning's east.*

ARS POETICA

*Miss Hotchkiss taught us to respect the image
 by « using it with care: sparingly; »
 though « one image is a poem; a poem is an image, »
 she was not an Imagist; she had read
 Saint Thomas Aquinas instead,
 being, as she was, catholic, Roman
 in her taste: Catullus. « Forbearing, » she
 said, « is the charity of art. » Remarkable woman,*

*her words still punctuate my thoughts
 about the craft of verse: « A poet speaks
 to say something— owes our thoughts;
 some poets are performers, tend to shout:
 Roman Candles burn quite quickly out. »
 The heady dictionaries of the wits
 sustain my gradeschool wonder. Since the Greeks,
 a metaphor still matters when it fits.*

JAMES PURDY

MERRY-GO-ROUND HORSES AND CARROUSEL

*Merry-go-round horses are the most beautiful,
call them carrousel if you want to,
I want them always to be merry-go-round.
Take their eyes for example,
are any horse's eyes like those,
Merry-go-round horses' eyes are jewels
and when they look at you they have only that one look:
come into the Enchantment.
And there is always music with merry-go-round horses
and a feeling of excitement and beginning:
you know everybody is children and summer is here about
in all ways.*

*and then while distracted thus
Winter has happened.
they put a dirty canvas over the whole CARROUSEL,
and peeping under a hole in the center of that,
looking in over the place where they
jumped and raced and danced to the Calliope,
what after all do you see but their extinct eyes
that were flaming jewels:
no music or children or sun,
the merry-go-round horses with broken legs.*

*And over a thousand miles away is the stables
where you left your horses*

*who by now have certainly forgot you,
with many races by them already victorious
and already too now unremembered.*

AN ODE TO GODWIN DWIGHT

*Godwin Dwight, your lips
form a line much thinner
than the pulp of your inherited flesh.
your eyes show strain, though beauty,
as though perhaps you cheated at cards
or in the silence of a very quiet room
struck a boy with a knife.
your high reticulate brow
shows a tempest of conflicting wants.
your nose which is sufficient for any sculptor
completes the melancholy of your gaze.
Holding as you are so much back,
keeping inside so much that must come out,
did you think godwin dwight to hide
from the photographer
what the poet would see anyhow after all
black and white as day.*

VENDRÁ

*at night under the evening roof
(heard a rat there or perhaps a squirrel all night)
in the window a vigil light,
on the wall an old bandera: a flag.
These are all reminds them of Puerto Rico,
they sit with the guitar and sing,
or with dominoes.
Sometimes they cry*

*the vigil light sputters
there is no sound on the roof
the night lasts a long time
and there is no sea nearby
even though it is not too far.*

*The scratching is in the wall
or is it the brain
the hands of the guitarrist hesitate
and tremble
but he does not think of Puerto Rico
his eye is on no flag
his ears wait for the fluttering
(perhaps no one human or living waits outside
and is making that sound)
the wind moves but does not find trees,
the vigil light makes as to go out,
Jesus sleeps on the cross
after he was prayed to all night*

*the vigil light
the vigil
the tired flame holds its peak to day
¿Quién es? who is? who is out there*

*who is watching me in my not native land,
who is out of all the enemies of my not-native land
who is watching me
who is watching
in the night in the dawn in the afternoon without
joy or hope or ease,
who is watching
in a land where no one watches,
who is it holds the finger still on the guitar,
and gives a silence without breath?*

WHAT

*what is it you are nearly saying
what is it at night or of afternoon
I nearly hear you say
what are the words which your lips begin to form
the light of the morning opens, perhaps one syllable,
and at afternoon your lips part again
as though the word would come.*

*and often as afternoon passes into evening
I see the struggle in your jaw and breast
and at night your mouth open at last,
you say a word.*

*but not what you hold inside
what rattled against your ribs
through the pale division of the day
as though your guts would speak
you held the words:
I hear now as though the moon shone on your eyes,
which glisten with hard restrained dry tears.*

IRA MOTHNER

ONE BRIGHT DAY IN AUTUMN

Thin fingers of sunlight tore at the drawn curtains as I awoke. The room was shadows, and I could hear her quiet, measured breathing beside me. The clock ticked busily towards ten.

I slipped silently from the bed, washed and dressed quickly. The room still smelled of the night before, the morning vinegar scent of spilled wine and the acrid aftertaste of argument.

In the hall, the femme de chambre wished me a good day and pressed me with her unspoken wish to enter the room and free it from the touch of the night before. « Later, » I told her, « towards noon. »

Outside, the morning mist had cleared and the promise of sunlight filtered down to the streets. There was a line outside the bakery and I stood there, waiting my turn. I was fully awake now, except for my right arm, which was still sleep cramped. I rubbed it gently and waited for the line to move.

Later, when the bread had been bought and the hundred grams of butter for our Sunday breakfast, I went back to the hotel and to the room on the fourth floor.

She was awake, washing in the alcove. The curtains were drawn and our morning ration of sunlight let into the room. The water for coffee was boiling on the little primus.

She didn't greet me as she came back into the room, patting her face softly with the fresh, white towel. I wished I'd

come back earlier. I loved to watch her wash, with little dabs of water, and stretch gently to wring the final touches of sleep from her limbs.

She had dressed before I returned, in a soft wool sweater and rough, tweed skirt. Now, she came to the table and made coffee in the two cups, cut the bread, and spread butter on the piece before her.

I stirred my coffee slowly, watching her. The covers were thrown back from the bed, showing the contours of our sleep. The straight, broad valley which was me, and the curled, slender channel which was she. A crumpled, dampened handkerchief lay beside her pillow.

« I'm not hungry, » I said, « I'd like to go for a walk, then have lunch at Louis'. »

« If you want to, » she agreed.

« Don't you? »

« If you want to. »

She rose, wrapped the butter and placed it outside the window. I laughed quietly. She turned.

« Remember the time the wine bottle fell out? »

« Yes, » she said, « I remember. » Then turned and put the bread in the little cabinet by the door.

While I shaved, she straightened the things on my desk and arranged the table. She was ready to leave, when I came out.

On Gay-Lussac, the Sunday crowd was thick, as we made our way the one short block to the boulevard, and across to the Luxembourg Gardens. It was a day which gives the lie to thoughts of barren winter. Cold, with the placid chill of late autumn, and bright with the filtered autumnal sunlight. The stark trees had dropped their last offerings, and the final souvenirs of summer, sparse and sere, crackled underfoot.

The sailboats were afloat in the huge circular pond, and small boys with chapped knees dodged among the casual strollers.

That day there was a rare unity touching the crowd which filled the gardens, an unity which reached beyond and embraced the entire city. The feeling was sparked by men and boys who bore the large contribution cans, slashed with the republican colors, and marked for the people of Hungary.

Paris wears an idea flagrantly. She gives her heart to it,

carries it into the streets, and shouts it from every square and monument.

We had marched one night with the crowd that thronged the Champs Elysées, the scores of thousands who had walked with solemn pace, and sung, so softly, « the Marseillaise. » They had laid a wreath at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier for the thousands who had died to win liberty for their country, and for the millions who had seen that liberty betrayed.

The headquarters of the Communist Party had been burned and the office of the communist daily *L'Humanité* attacked. Posters screamed the plight of Hungary from almost every wall and condemnation of the Russian act.

The city felt all of this, and I felt too little of it. Somehow my own private world had loomed so large, at that particular moment, that I could not reach beyond it. So, we walked in the gardens that morning, and I dropped several francs into the collection to join the legion of those who wore the little tricolor emblems.

She had not spoken since we left the hotel. So, we walked on silently, until we came to the little carousel, where mock horses chase each other in endless circles.

« I'm getting off, » she said.

« Oh. »

« I'm getting off, » she repeated quietly, making a slight gesture towards the carousel. « I'm going away. »

I didn't answer then, and we walked on to the little theater where the marionettes perform. We stopped by the barred window.

« I know. You didn't have to tell me. »

She looked up quickly. « It's what you want. »

« Is it? »

She thought. « I don't really know. That's it, I don't know, and now I don't want to know anymore. I don't want to cry and hurt to find out. I'm tired. »

We turned then towards the pond. The crowd was leaving, hurrying home towards a thousand Sunday dinners. The men with collection cans followed along.

We left the gardens near the palace. The sun was midday bright and filled the streets with its greater warmth, loosing, for the moment, the chill which held to stained, grey walls.

We turned into the restaurant on Rue de Vaugirard, across

from the Salle Luxembourg. I felt the mistake made as we walked through the door, but it was too late then.

Louis had seen us enter, and hurried across to greet us, an almost comic figure in his voluminous apron and starched, white jacket. He greeted her warmly and helped her with her coat. Then, turned to me, noting with approval the tricolor in my lapel.

« C'est bien triste, hein, » he remarked glumly, then, brightening, he led us to a table by the window.

We ate slowly, as people do who have no place to go.

« I'm sorry, » she started.

« No, you're not. »

« You're right, » she agreed, « I'm not. I wish I could be. I feel rotten. I don't want to go. »

« I know. »

« But I'm tired. I don't want to struggle any more. »

« I never asked you to. »

« I know, » she admitted. Then she tried an almost pathetic half smile, « you bastard. »

She sipped her wine slowly. I loved to watch her drink. Like a cat, her pointed tongue would dart between her lips as she tilted her glass. She would drink carefully, with little sips.

She had a most serious face, if taken at a glance, but part by part, it was delicately piquant.

After lunch, we walked back to Saint Michel, then turned towards Saint Germain. We passed a small street stand of candied nuts, and smelt the heavy, cloying sweetness from the kettle. « Marrons chauds, » asked the old woman, as we passed. I felt like buying some, although I've never really liked them. She liked them though. She could eat them by the pound and sometimes did. She was the same way about pastry, and would buy three or four in a shop to eat as she walked along the street. Then, she might decide she was eating too many, and not touch them for a month.

She wasn't going to leave. I think I knew that. She was just waiting for the right cue, waiting for the right line to come along, so she could stay. She would stay, I knew, because I would ask her, and I would keep on asking her and telling her, and it would be the same again.

There was a crowd at the intersection. When we came near, I saw a boy and girl, holding collection cans, and crying out, « Pour la Population Hongroise. » There was a group of young men nearby, selling day old copies of *L'Humanité*. « Petits Fascistes, » they laughed. Nobody came near the children. The crowd waited.

We were walking between the children and the crowd. « Pour la Population Hongroise, » they asked. We stopped. They couldn't have been more than ten, in short, brown pants, and a carefully pressed cotton print. They looked cold and their little voices seemed close to tears. I reached into my pocket and dropped several hundred francs into the can. Then, taking the tricolor, placed it beside the first one on my lapel.

We walked on, towards the young men. One of them moved towards me, a slight, blond boy, with a wisp of a moustache. He plucked the new emblem from my lapel and threw it on the pavement.

« Qu'est-ce que tu fais? » I demanded, pushing him aside.

There was no answer, for, all at once, the crowd moved behind me. Someone kicked over the stack of newspapers and scattered them across the street. The young men crowded in. One of them kicked me in the stomach with his knee, just missing the groin. As I lunged forward, I was struck on the side of the head and went down.

The crowd was furious now, and the young men were standing their ground by the overturned pile of papers. I struggled to get back on my feet. The children had been led away by an older woman, but their collection can had overturned and twenty, fifty, and hundred franc pieces rolled across the sidewalk. The little box had fallen too, and there were tricolor emblems scattered about.

I tried to fight free of the crowd but kept being pushed towards the struggle. Finally, I found myself facing the young man with the blond moustache. He was swinging wildly and kicking out. I batted down his right arm and landed a solid punch against his nose. I felt the cartilage give and he sank down onto the pile of papers, blood running from his nostrils and along his lips. He started to cry.

By then, the police has arrived and started to break it up. Several men took me by the arms and rushed me into

a café. I saw her standing by the café door as we rushed inside, and smiled at her.

Downstairs, we washed away the dirt and blood and checked for damage. My face didn't seem too badly hurt, except for the bruise on the right side. I felt as though I might have broken a rib, but the most serious damage was a tear on the bottom of my trousers. This proved so amusing to my new companions that they insisted upon making reparations, or at least standing me to a few drinks.

When we came back upstairs, I looked for her. I'd thought she might follow inside. Well, perhaps she'd gone back to the hotel.

The café owner set up a round of drinks to start the celebration. Oh, it was a fine brawl. We were all a little embarrassed and talked a lot, and drank a lot. They thought it was terribly amusing, my being an American, and I told them I thought their being French was almost as funny.

It was after six when we left, and already dark. I walked slowly up Saint Michel. I knew what I'd tell her. I'd ask her to stay, tell her I wanted her, really wanted her. That's what I'd say.

I turned onto Royer-Collard and up the steps of the hotel. The key was in the box. I took it and ran upstairs. She wasn't there.

The room had been cleaned, cleaned of everything, even the smells had gone, and all her things had gone too, the little stuffed rabbit and the stockings on the towel rack. Everything had gone.

I wasn't worried. I'd find her. You can't hide from your friends in Paris. I'd find her tomorrow or the next day... but I never did.

The pin has rusted now, and the colors of the pasteboard faded, but still I keep the little tricolor and the memory of that bright day in autumn, so long ago in all but time.

RICHARD SELIG

LAST POEMS

POEM FOR W.B. YEATS

*The seed is curled
Alone in the shell
Or lost in the world
Like Ariel.*

*Time is a number
Whose changeless grace
I cannot remember
In a stranger's face.*

*The days I follow
Follow me after;
The wish is hollow
The will grows softer.*

*Bird in its season
Preening and gyring:
How vain is reason
To be so desiring!*

*I rush in the tread
Of another's doom
Praising the dead
In another room*

*Where Mary and Oisin
Grieve alone
Brandishing, brandishing
An old man's bones.*

THE SUBWAY IS NO PLACE FOR A HORSE

*I did not know your car had fins,
Your eyes are really screens;
That all your veins have fat inside
And all your foods are vitamins.*

KEEP HANDS OFF DOORS

*Rules that rule you, winds that blow you
Said I knew you, but I didn't.
Car that drives you, coat that hangs you,
Chair that sits you do not know you.*

KEEP YOUR CITY CLEAN

*I did not know your name or address,
I did not know you well enough
To understand what you didn't say,
And now I know you less and less.*

UPTOWN DOWNTOWN EXIT

*I did not know you could not sing.
I did not know you could not listen.
I did not know you whined so much.
I did not know you could not sing.*

DON'T SPIT

*Every day I paid my fare,
Every day I read my paper,
Every day I shoved against you,
I saw the sign above your hair:*

THINK

LAST POEMS

*I've thought and thought and thought
While the East River enters the Bay
And the boys in Brooklyn grow old
And the labels tell me what I've bought.*

UNITED CHARITY

*I did not know that you had died,
For the sidewalks rolled on,
And your feet would not stop walking
And the shining signs all lied.*

I SHALL FEAR NO EVIL

POEM

*In the fabled kingdom of my heart
The Hawk pursues his love,
Breaks from the sky with talons hooked
To claim the tender dove.*

*No hawk knows better grace
Nor dove a deeper pain
Than I, alone in this dark place,
Loved by beasts of the brain.*

POEM

*Who have gone before me,
Stronger by the breath they give,
I recall the men of my race,
Grave ghosts in whom I live.*

*I receive their many blessings
For a journey from flesh and bone,
Questioning their shadows, saying,
Fathers, were you alone?*

ON THE VERGE OF SUMMER

*On the verge of summer rocks, waves, bones break
On the beach of the year where Achilles summoned
His mother from the sea: I hear that loud lament —
The son and the mother and the hero's inchoate death.
Whether with sperm or ships, the universe is crowded.
Reigning by chance, dread sovereign to a deeper
Imperfection of limbs and senses, anarchic lord
Of this hour when the tides assume the shape of his woe,
The hero is in the sea; his anger equal to the indifferent
Storm, his god's confusion cosmic in the waters,
His prayer has turned the tide; his mother is the mist,
Her voice the lamentation of the wind.*

WEST MAYO COAST

*Not knowing what architect built these limbs or broke
This grass or scarred these stones: grey jagged stones,
Sere grass, young limbs, yet I record their presence
And that of shells, beige or white, always symmetrical
Except when broken; record, too, the heavy smell
Of rotting kelp, and the sound of, always pleasant, the sea;
And the ease of gulls constructed for the swoop of air
Behind a ship, above waves, on headlands rising.*

TWO UNDERWORLDS

*In the garden of Persephone trees grow in the dark.
A strong wind blows when trains come.*

*In Hades there are four rivers, and there are the dead.
It is never cold. You never see birds.*

Odysseus, Aeneas, Orpheus went there and escaped alive.
You rarely see three-headed dogs on week-days.

To get there one crosses the Styx by ferry. Charon is the ferryman's name.
When you get on, one man closes all the doors.

The architecture of Hades is either Classical, Gothic or Baroque.
Among the white tiles there are signs telling you where you are.

Poets find Hades an evocative image, being the kingdom of death.
It is best to concentrate on one's newspaper.

The Christian counterpart of Hades is the Inferno.
People seldom excuse themselves when they push you.

Jesus Christ harrowed the place, leading the good people to paradise.
Between stations the tunnel is dark. It is too noisy to sing.

THREE SONGS IN ANTICIPATION OF SPRING

1 blood

The bees thought it was sour.
They mumbled
one to another by the hour.
'Quite a curious thing', they said,
one stumbled in
and was turned quite red.
He fumbled,
cried 'How sweet', and then fell dead.

2 youth

*As if it were stolen like Prometheus his fire
I take down the rain until it floods
And I am filled with flames, sperm, and mire;
Full of starry contumely; eager like buds
For shaking forth, or fish forth to spawn:
This courage is easy, a quality of my age —
I inhabit myself with fear and outrage.
I could when old steal quiet from a cold dawn.*

3 opening

*Such as the wild beast among dry grass
My skin untames green sheaves,
Sucks up their juice and breathes and grieves;
The white sky, the green plains pass
Like a touch, for nature's world is braille;
For sight is the longest touch;
for the brass
God in the temple cannot eat the frail
Flames of the pomegranate or the beads
Of the full moon strung on the wet reeds.*

RETURN

*In early sunlight, small voices in the rain,
The dead begin in the first words:
The miller's daughter, the courageous knight,
And father who fears, too, the imagined swords,
The inevitable snow;*

and lonely at twilight,
On the immense desert, lions defend
Those vast and complicated tombs:

*I know that silently, in the inviolate rooms
Of my past, rises a fresh wind.*

DECEMBER 1951

*Of solemn journeys of the mind the blood
Is full of ships and death; dreams, of grief;
Sleep is metaphor of none: what the race
Intends by the march is lost by the way
In the sound of engines; and the human voice,
Shocked into song, records the first birds
In Paradise, and then: the continuous commerce of flesh.
Having no angels to trumpet home the sick,
No knowledge of the changing skin of continents,
Atoms' quiet center, numbers of nothing,
Space between time and God's face,
We celebrate our eyes:*

*In the doorway,
On the shore, in the glance at the burning city,
In the silent falling of stars, the whispered
Anger of lovers, in the fears that make alive
The useless thought, it is only the loss
that speaks, judgement not spoken, actions not taken.*

A VOYAGE

*Beginning another, stranger voyage, stars shook
From sails. The water eased against my skin.
Shawled in wind and salt I took the last look
At what I was: wine-dark, dark as blood as wine.*

*With wind for courage, water salty as my tears,
I gave to grief its due and drowned it with my going.
Because the land, too still, too slow and full of fears,
Was out of sight, I sank unsteady roots, began my growing*

*There, in a feminine, indifferent element
Where nothing seems to change and nothing stays.
Accepting all the moods of heaven, kind or violent,
She held and pleased me upon unquiet thighs.*

EVEREST

*What is man that drives him to the skies?
Ambition's child tumbling in the snow,
Chancing his spindly bones against the slow
Flow of the blue rock-cracking malice of ice:
Is it the fault that lost the original prize
Now guiles him up to gasp where thin winds blow,
To near the light, to go where no men go,
Scaling, half-blind, the ridge to Paradise?*

*A mountain has been God, the home of gods,
Asylum of peace, prelude to violence,
And the hazardous hard way up of the blest:
Because he walks on the world's roof and treads
The high ground where heavenly footfalls once
Passed lightly by, man can never rest.*

MY SELF, MY SONG

*Time, even whose presence is remembered, now interns
My four and twentieth year. Past gray siloes and the barns,
Through the shuddering grain and the tall corn's
Green whisper, past liberty, all that man shapes,
All human aegis beyond the mortal and the measured slopes,
Time goes before and seizes: no lyric thought returns.*

*My self, my song, a hunter, disfavoured by the wind,
Stalks the unseen enemy lurking in the mind,
And hopes — his senses tricked — its danger be made clear,
than time, this enemy prove friendlier.*

*As a lean and gilded hawk unhooded climbs the sky,
Swiftly from the hunter's wrist, to seize its prey,
So I prey on heaven divinity,
Grapple with love, and tear from flight all hope, all joy.*

RUDOLF KASSNER

ZWEI ERZÄHLUNGEN

DIE PUPPE

Unten im Thal des grossen Stromes ist heute Markt, der grosse Markt des Jahres. Alles eilt hin zur Stadt. Der Zeitpunkt ist richtig gewählt, die Weinlese zu Ende, der neue Wein gährt in den Fässern, das Vieh ist von den Matten in die Ställe unten gebracht worden. Bis hoch hinauf, wo auf Bergkanten in schmalen Streifen Fruchtländs der *Fendant* wächst, ein weisser Wein, von dem die Winzer sagen, dass er das Blut scharf machte, weiss man heute, dass unten in der Stadt das Fest der heiligen Katerina, der Schutzpatronin der ganzen Gegend, gefeiert wird und die Menschen von überall her aus den vielen Seitenthälern, die in das grosse Thal des Stromes einmünden, zusammenbringt. Ist es nicht gut so, dem Menschen angemessen, so wie er einmal geschaffen, in die Schöpfung eingebaut ist, dass an die Leiden der zu Tode gemarterten Heiligen noch nach anderthalb Jahrtausenden die Geschäfte und Freuden der Menschen angeschlossen werden, Gleichnis der Einigung des Himmlischen, dem wir unterworfen sind, und des Irdischen, das uns zusammenhält? Winzer, Bauern aus kleinen Gehöften oben, Pächter, alle mit ihren Frauen, die Kinder an der Hand führen, das ist alles früh am Morgen aufgebrochen und unterwegs zum Marktplatz der Stadt. Viele von ihnen treiben Rinder vor sich her,

in der Mehrzahl sind es Kühe, zuweilen wohl auch ein Stier, gedrungener als die Kühe mit ihren von Geburten ausgetriebenen Leibern. Sie gehören alle einer kleinen, trockenen, wurzeligen Rasse an, dazu geeignet, flink und voll Eifer die mit einem Weinfass beladenen Wägelchen zu ziehen. Im Herbst werden mit den Kühen Kämpfe veranstaltet, um sie auf ihre Wildheit und Kraft zu prüfen. Alles das, Mensch und Vieh, wie gesagt, will hinunter zur breit angelegten Strasse, Avenue du Marché genannt, zu deren beiden Seiten Buden aufgestellt sind, lange Tische stehen mit allem, was der Winzer und Bauer braucht; Wäsche, billige Kleider, steife Arbeitshosen, Schuhe, an Stricken bäumelnd, Schanktische stehen da mit dem Wein des Landes, dem erwähnten *Fendant* und dem anderen, roten mit einem sanften Schimmer von Blau, dem *Dôle*, nicht minder gerühmt und um seiner besonderen Qualitäten geschätzt von Kundigen. Es geht alles still vor sich, das Prüfen der Ware, der Tücher und Kleidungsstücke, die vor das Sonnenlicht gehalten, übernommen oder wieder zurückgelegt werden. Diese Menschen mit harten, gebräunten Gesichtern, zuweilen Rassen zugehörig, die nach langen Kriegszügen, verlorenen Schlachten auf der Flucht vor den Siegern in den Thälern, in deren verstecktesten Winkeln gedrängt, zurückgeblieben sind seit vielen Jahrhunderten. Sie sind wortkarg zu Fremden in einer Sprache, die nur ihnen selbst ganz verständlich und geläufig bleibt. Heute ist noch zu allem dazu keine Schule, am Vormittag nicht, also jagen die Kinder in Scharen mitten durch die Strassen und Gassen, blasen kleine Blechtrumpeten und versuchen die Holzflöten, die sie eben noch geschenkt erhielten. Knaben haben heute Geburtstag, es soll Glück bringen, am Tage der Heiligen auf die Welt gekommen zu sein, viele Mädchen ihren Namenstag. Die meisten werden wohl ihre Geschenke erhalten haben, die sie an den Mund legen oder in der Hand halten, damit sie Ruhe geben und Vater oder Mutter nicht stören bei deren Handel vor den Buden.

Von der lang sich hinziehenden Avenue du marché führen Strassen in alle Richtungen bis hin zu schmalen Wegen hinauf in die Berge, eine davon aber führt uns zum Friedhof und daran vorbei, an dessen hoher Mauer, mit Blumen aus Ritzen wachsend, Bänke angebracht sind. Heute bleiben diese den grössten Teil des Tages vom frühen Morgen

an besetzt von Menschen der verschiedensten Art und Herkunft: den alten, höchst gebrechlichen Inwohnern des nahen Asyls, die ihre müden, angeschwollenen Beine in das Sonnenlicht ausstrecken, Bäuerinnen, Winzerinnen mit Kindern oder allein, Rast haltend auf dem Wege heim in die Berge, ihr Mittagsmahl aus dem Korbe vor sich verzehrend, unter die Kinder, die herumstehen, Brot, Äpfel, etwas Chokolade vertheilend. Kühe schleifenden Ganges werden vorbeigetrieben, frisch vom Markt, Ziegen, Lämmer. Auf einen der Bänke aber hatte sich Rinzai hingesetzt, am Rande mehr als der Mitte zu, wie einer, der nicht müde ist und nur kurz Rast halten will, um bald aufzubrechen, Rinzai, sage ich, der grosse Zenmeister. Es braucht nicht erst erwähnt werden, dass niemand hier und in der weitesten Umgebung ihn kannte, von ihm wusste, ihn ahnte. Rinzai war alt geworden, hatte das Bogenschiessen mit geschlossenen Augen aufgegeben und war zum Wanderer geworden, ziellos. Er empfand es so, empfand es, ohne es mitteilen zu können oder zu wollen den anderen, dass diese Ziellosigkeit des Wandernden dem blinden Schiessen der jungen Jahre entspreche, dieses im Ganzen aufwäge, das Gleichgewicht halte, gleichwie er fühlte, auf unaussprechliche Weise einsah, sich in Gedanken daran geborgen empfand, dass in eben dem Ganzen der Welt die Leiden einer Heiligen, die Todesmartern, sich gut vertrügen mit den Geschäften und Freuden dieses dem Gegenwärtigen hingegebenen Volkes. Auch hier lag etwas vor in diesem glücklichen Augenblick, Stunde, Tag, wie Ziellosigkeit, die im Sinne eines Höheren, Unfassbaren, Nicht- zu- Begrenzenden Hingebung einschlösse. Wir sagen von Menschen, dass sie wandern, von den Gestirnen, dass sie wandeln. Wie führt uns hier nicht die Sprache! Rinzai wusste dieses sein Wandern von Ort zu Ort durch das Land, durch die Länder auf seine Weise mit dem Wandeln der Gestirne im ganzen Himmelsraum im Einklang, und zwar im Sinne eben einer Ziellosigkeit, die zugleich Hingebung wäre. Sind es vielleicht diese Gedanken, ähnliche, die ihn jetzt festhielten, da er auf der Bank dem Rande zu sass, den Blick auf den Boden vor sich gesenkt. Plötzlich hob er ihn und sah sich um, blickte von Bank zu Bank, in seinen Augen war etwas wie frohe List, die ihm vielleicht vom blinden Schiessen seiner jüngern Jahre geblieben war. Auf einmal aber schien es, als hätte sein Blick die List verloren, Rinzai war stutzig

geworden. Auf einem der Bänke sass ein Frauenwesen, allein, genau die Mitte der Bank einnehmend, sass wie etwas, das ein anderer dort in eben die Mitte hinplaciert hat, sass ohne sich zu rühren, sass wie ein Ding, dieses Menschenwesen, Weib, Frau, alternde Jungfrau, als alles dies durchaus zugleich alt und jung im Gesicht, die Haut gelblich, unfrisch, trocken, von vielen kleinen Fältchen durchzogen, das Haar strähnig, von fremder Hand nicht ohne Sorgfalt hergerichtet, wie geplättet. Dieses alternde Mädchen, die beste Bezeichnung noch dafür, hatte, schien es weiter, den Sonntagsstaat angelegt, auf dem Kopf sass ein etwas zu kleiner schwarzer Hut mit weisser Ruche schief auf, er wurde ihr aufgesetzt, alles an ihr war von fremder Hand zugerichtet, das Schnupftuch in die eine Hand gelegt, eine Banane in die andere. So sass es da, den Mund offen, die Augen blicklos ins Leere haltend. Eine arme Närrin, eine von den nicht seltenen Dorfnärrinnen der Stadt, der ganzen Gegend, die bei den Eltern, bei Verwandten lebt, mit ihnen das Brot teilt, wohl zu kleinen Verrichtungen im Haus oder Stall verwendet wird. Heute am Fest- und Markttag sind alle Insassen am Markt, das Haus bleibt verschlossen, und die Närrin ist hierher auf die Bank an der Friedhofsmauer gebracht, wo sie mitten unter Menschen, die der Närrin nicht achteten, bleibt, bis man sie holen kommt.

Rinzais Blick liess von ihr nicht ab Sie sitzt da wie eine Puppe, die ein Kind hingesezt hat: Du bleib jetzt sitzen hier, bis ich Dich hole! Verstehst du? Du laufst mir nicht davon! An einer Puppe ist alles von aussen. Sie hat kein Bild von sich selber, wie die übrigen Menschen eines von sich haben, was unsere Seele ausmacht, uns zu eigen ist und zugleich uns mit den Nächsten verbindet. Die Seele ein Bild! Sind die Götter, die wir verehren, nicht auch Bilder? Bilder der Seele? Nicht nichts, aber das, was wir vor und zwischen uns und das Nichts hinstellen? Und was uns vor dem Nichts schützt? Wer oder was schützt aber diese Närrin, die ohne Blick ist, vor dem Nichts? Wer anderes als jener verborgene eine Gott, an den die Menschen fest glauben und von dem geschrieben steht, dass er die Welt aus dem Nichts geschaffen habe? In das die Närrin jetzt starrt. Verloren starrt und doch geschützt. Von Gott geschützt.

DER PRIESTER

Der Vater des Semjon Semjonowitsch Prutkoff, des Vaters Vater, der Urgrossvater, der Vater seiner Mutter, alle waren sie Priester gewesen der Reihe nach, Popen in Dörfern, in kleinen Städten der sogenannten schwarzen Erde Russlands. Der Vater war im ersten grossen Hungersjahr nach dem Umsturz in Moskau, wo er an Strassenecken bettelnd tagsüber zu stehen gezwungen war, verhungert am Pflaster liegend aufgefunden worden, die Mutter eines Abends ausgeblieben, will sagen: in die Kellerwohnung, welche sie mit anderen Popenfrauen teilte, nicht mehr zurückgekehrt. Gütige Menschen nahmen sich des verwaisten Knaben an, gaben ihm von dem wenigen, was sie hatten, zu essen, zogen ihn auf und brachten ihn zuletzt in einem geheimgehaltenen Priesterseminar unter, wie es solcher allenthalben über ganz Russland verstreut gab und die mit den allerspärlichsten Mitteln von jenen unterhalten wurden, die der Meinung waren, es sollte an solchen Menschen nicht fehlen, an gläubigen, damit die Saat der heiligen Lehre bewahrt bleibe für die kommenden Zeiten des Anbaus und der Pflege in den Gemütern der Menschen, Zeiten, in den Gebeten täglich, stündlich herbeigefleht. Nun geschah es in Wirklichkeit so nach dem Glauben und der Hoffnung derer, die im Stillen nicht verzagt hatten: die Jahre der grössten Schande, schien es, waren über die heilige Erde des Vaterlandes hinweggegangen, hatten sich verzogen, Wolken gleich nach einem Gewitter, und die Kirchen und Klöster die zuletzt, soweit sie nicht zerstört worden waren, der Propaganda zur Verbreitung der Gottlosigkeit, dem Kino und anderen Lustbarkeiten gedient hatten, wurden, soweit die Mittel aus Sammlungen reichten, in Gotteshäuser zurückverwandelt.

Semjon Semjonowitsch wurde Pope in einem Dorfe eines Gouvernements im mittleren Russland. In einer alten Holzkirche, die, weil sie zuletzt als Scheune gedient hatte, gänzlich wieder hergestellt werden musste. Im Inneren wurden von neuem wie einst Messen gelesen, Kinder getauft, Paare getraut, die Gebete vor den Särgen der Toten gesprochen, und es geschah alles genau so, wie es seit mehr als tausend Jahren in den Gotteshäusern, die zumeist aus dem Holz der uner-

messlichen Wälder ringsum gezimmert waren, von Priestern verrichtet wurde.

Semjon Semjonowitsch war ein gläubiger Mensch. Was wir Glauben nennen, war Gottes Wille in ihm, der ihn lenkte, trieb oder stiess, wie die Menschen ihren Arm strecken, lenken oder stossen. Ihm fehlte gänzlich jede Vorstellung von dem, was die Menschen Zweifel nennen. Zweifel an Gott müsste ihn lähmen, nein nicht so: müsste in Verzweiflung enden und diese ihn aufreissen. Im Vergleich mit einer so gearteten Verzweiflung sollte blosser Zweifel sich als ein Leichtes, gut für Menschen ohne Gewicht, ohne Herz und Gewissen, als ein Spiel mit Worten erweisen, um Worte herum, um Menschen der blossen Gewalt, Menschen ohne Not, ohne Not des Herzens. Aus einer solchen Not heraus, Not des Herzens wahrhaftiger Christen, die mit dem Anfang da ist, wird es wohl gewesen sein, dass Semjon Semjonowitsch der Gedanke eines Tages überkam, er wusste nicht wie, der Gedanke er war mit einemmal draussen und nicht mehr zurückzunehmen dorthin, woher er ihn überfallen hatte der Gedanke also, dass der Mensch, um seiner Not und Zerrissenheit abzuhelpen, die Wunde zu heilen im Innersten des Wesens. Gott aus sich herausstellen müsste in den Raum um und vor sich, wie gross oder wie klein dieser wäre, herausstellen wie ein Bild, wie ein Ding. Es war der Gedanke eines Nachtwandlers über ein Dach hinweg oder wo immer, der nicht weiss, wohin er seinen Fuss setzt. Das war er, der Gedanke eines närrischen Menschen. Hatte Gott nicht auch solche geschaffen? Manche werden ihn als den Gedanken eines süchtigen Menschen bezeichnen, eines Götzendieners, doch das war Semjon Semjonowitsch nicht: süchtig und Götzdiener, sondern seine Meinung war, dass die Menschen alle aufgerissen wären, dass sie, um mit ihrem Riss und ihrer Spaltung weiter leben zu können in der Zeit, deren Ende sie nicht abzusehen vermögen, schief geworden wären, scheele Blicke, solche voll Neids, aufeinander würfen, dass das Ganze nicht mehr ganz wäre, die Teile sich übereinander würfen und ein Teil den anderen aufzehrte, mit einem Worte: dass die Ebenbildschaft des Menschen mit Gott verloren gegangen sei. Oder was anderes sollte daraus geworden sein, oh Mensch, als dass du erbärmlich geworden seiest und so stolz zugleich, hochfahrend! Wie bist du nicht

stolz, du Erbärmlich-Armseliger, und dazwischen, zwischen Stolz und Erbärmlichkeit, rinnt du aus ins Leere, rinnt aus gleich einem lecken Gefäss oder einem Schlauch, der ein Loch bekommen hat, rinnt aus in der Zeit ohne Ende.

Da er so dachte, fiel Semjon Semjonowitsch der römische Soldat ein, unter dem Kreuz stehend, den Leib des Menschensohnes mit der Lanze anbohrend, so dass das Blut daraus floss... Semjon Semjonowitsch' Körper wie Seele waren beide wohl auch als Folge langer Entbehrungen und Leiden der in Kellern, Löchern verlebten Jugend in steter Erregung mit Anfällen von grosser Erschöpfung, und so ward er leicht Worten, mehr noch Bildern preisgegeben, die auf ihn einstürzten und deren er sich nicht erwehren konnte.

Eines Nachmittags auf einem von der Sonne eines sehr heissen Sommertags durchglühten Feldraine sitzend, mitten in Feldblumen, wie sie auf solchen Rainen wachsen: Tymian, der leuchtend blaue Natternwurz, der rötliche Hauhechel und andere, die infolge der Hitze einen würzigen Wohlgeruch um sich verbreiteten, den Semjon Semjonowitsch gern einsog, Kraft daraus ziehend, mit seinen mageren, entbehrenden Händen die warme Erde fassend, stellte er sich mit einem Male die Frage — wie war er doch stets voll von dergleichen Fragen fielen sie ihm ein, fielen ihn an — ob diese Not, dieses Auslaufen, Ausrinnen ins Leere, Endlose, von Menschen nie zu Ermessende noch bestünde, wenn es nur die Erde für uns gäbe, unsere Erde, nichts anderes als diese, die seine armen kranken Hände jetzt greifen. War das nicht wiederum die Frage eines Nachtwandlers am Rande eines Daches, den wir nicht anrufen, anrühren dürfen, damit er nicht stürze und sich den Hals breche? Die Frage eines ganz und gar närrischen Menschen, die Frage letztlich eines Menschen, dessen Augen nichts von dem, was da ist und wächst sehen, weil er fort das Ende denkt? Sie war es ebenso wie jene andere, die wir kennen, ob es nicht der Menschen höchstes Ziel, des Menschen Ende auf Erden sein solle, Gott aus sich herauszustellen in den Raum vor sich, wie gross oder klein dieser auch wäre. Die Frage war draussen und nicht mehr zurückzunehmen. Wären wir dann nicht festgehalten von etwas, was fest bleibt in der Dauer, angeschmiegt daran, wie sich das Kind an die Mutter schmiegt, wer kann dazwischengreifen und

trennen wollen? Wir wären geborgen und glücklich. Wie schnell unterlief ihm auf einmal nicht das Wort: Glück, glücklich, ihm, der nichts von den Dingen sah und nur das Ende dachte, der nichts sah mit dem Blick des Entbehrenden als das Ende. Glück, glücklich, sprach oder dachte er vor sich hin, wäre die Erde aber dann, wenn es nur sie allein für uns gäbe, nicht wie ein Ball und die kleine Stelle derselben, die meine Hand jetzt berührt, das Ausgeschnittene, das Ebene, die Scheibe eines Balls, den sich Kinder spielend zuwerfen? Wären wir alle dann nicht gleich? Gäbe es noch Unterschiede? Noch Gut und Böse, dort, wo alles rund ist und der Spitze entbehrt, des Zieles! Ohne Spitze, ohne Ziel was soll das? An einem Ball ist alles von aussen. Was aber ist innen?! Nichts ist innen und weil alles aussen ist, so ist alles zugleich Entstellung zu den Menschen hin, ist alles drohend, ist alles Angst. Laufen wir aus in Angst, rinnen wir aus in Nichts. Das wiederum nicht ist, das nur ein Wort ist, im Kreis, sinnlos im Sinnlosen auslaufend ohne Ende. Was aber ist der Sinn? Ist Sinn nicht das, was uns hindert, auszulaufen im Kreis, auszulaufen ins Nichts, ins Leere, in der Angst? Es steht geschrieben: dass das Wort Fleisch geworden sei in der Zeit. Ist dies nicht der Sinn: das Wort, das Fleisch geworden ist, und zwar in der Zeit? Ist Zeit nicht so viel wie Sinn um desentwillen, was wir Ewigkeit nennen? Oh Sinn, oh Gnade und Erhöhung! Welch letztere nur um des Sinnes willen uns vom Nächsten nicht scheidet. Was wiederum das Wort ausmacht, das Fleisch geworden ist, damit das Nichts nicht sei!

NELLY SACHS

GEDICHTE

*Weiter
Weiter
durch das Rauchbild
abgebrannter Liebesmeilen
hin zum Meer
das grollend beisst
seinen Horizontenring in Stücke —
Weiter
Weiter
hin zum Schwarzgespann
mit dem Sonnenkopf im Wagen
das auf weisse Mauern steigt
durch den Stacheldraht der Zeit
in das Auge des Gefangenen sinkt
blutbeträuft —
bis der endlich
weiter
weiter
mit dem Schlaf verbrüdet
in die grosse Freiheit läuft —
Schon hat ihn der Traum gefangen
in dem sterngeschlossenen Zirkel...*

*

*Tänzerin,
bräutlich*

aus Blindenraum
 empfängst du
 ferner Schöpfungstage
 spriessende Sehnsucht.
 Mit deines Leibes Musikstrassen
 weidest du die Luft ab
 dort wo der Erdball
 neuen Eingang sucht
 zur Geburt.
 Durch Nachtlava
 wie leise sich lösende Augenlider
 blinzelt des Schöpfungsvulkane
 Erstlingsschrei.
 Im Gezweige deiner Glieder
 bauen die Ahnungen
 ihre zwitschernden Nester.
 Wie eine Melkerin
 in der Dämmerung
 ziehen deine Fingerspitzen
 an den verborgenen Quellen des Lichtes
 bis du durchstochen von
 der Marter des Abends
 dem Mond deine Augen
 zur Nachtwache auslieferst.
 Tänzerin,
 kreissende Wöchnerin
 du allein
 trägst an verborgener Nabelschnur
 an deinem Leib
 den Gott vererbten Zwillingsschmuck
 von Tod und Geburt.

*

Und immer
 die Wahrsager des Himmels
 hinter angelehnten Türen
 und die salzigen Flügel
 duftend vom Meer
 abgelegt an der Schwelle —
 und Fischernetze immer zum Trocknen aufgehängt.

*Und die blitzweissen Adern der Erleuchtung
 längst in Daniels Träume eingegangen.
 Fächelt etwas
 wie Wind am Haar unserer Unwissenheit?
 Löffelt Tod den Stein fort
 bis in den Staub?
 Meer, hingekniet singt Prophetia
 in gemuscheltes Ohr?
 Vorausgesagte Sterngeometrie
 in der Honigwabe
 damit Sonne süß werde?
 Zyklen der Liebe wachsend
 transparent wie Kristall
 über Schlafgrenzen hinaus?
 Asche
 nur Verband für den Schmerz des Lichtes
 auf Erden?*

*

*Alle landmessenden Finger
 erheben sich
 von den Staubgrenzen
 und
 Augenbesät
 das Tuch der Cherubim um die Schläfen
 so zieht der Blick
 durch entleerte Linse der Sonne
 Schlaf überfällt Dächer und Wände
 Auch der Engel hat Abschied genommen
 bekränzt mit Traum
 Rauschend am Gehör vorbei
 das Floss beseelt
 mit dir
 Wir sind
 nur wir*

*

*Inmitten
 der Leidensstation*

*besessen von einem Lächeln
giebst du Antwort
denen
die im Schatten fragen
mit dem Mund voll Gottverzogener Worte
aufgehämmert
aus der Vorzeit des Schmerzens.
Die Liebe hat kein Sterbehemd mehr an
versponnen der Raum
im Faden deiner Sehnsucht
Gestirne prallen rückwärts ab
von deinen Augen
diesem
leise verkohlenden Sonnenstoff
aber
über deinem Haupte
der Meeresstern der Gewissheit
mit den Pfeilen der Auferstehung
leuchtet rubinrot —*

MARIE LUISE KASCHNITZ

In memoriam Marieluise Hensel

DAS ROTE NETZ

Es war gewiss nicht so, aber es hätte doch so sein können, an jenem warmen diesigen Julinachmittag am See. Die Sommergäste unterwegs zur Jause, zu dem oder jenem Gasthaus, haben Sie gehört, Kuchen gibt es dort ohne Brotmarken, für jeden ein grosses Stück. Denn das waren noch die Jahre der Brotmarken und des Zufussgehens, nur dass die Grenze hier nahe war, im Bodensee verlief die Grenze und auf dem See fuhren die Fischer und auch manchmal über den See und dann brachten sie etwas mit oder auch etwas hinüber, eine lebendige Fracht. Einem Menschen, dem das Herz im Hals schlug bei der Kahnpartie und der sich ängstlich duckte, wenn der Scheinwerferstrahl näher glitt, und in der Fischerstube am heimatlichen Ufer lag unter der Milchtasse sein Geld, viel Geld, weil der Fährmann ja auch einiges riskierte, seine Freiheit, vielleicht seinen Kopf. Sodass in dieser schönen Landschaft neben dem Geflüster über die Tasse Bohnenkaffee und das Stück markenfreien Kuchen noch ein anderes herlief, ein leiseres, gefährlicheres, vorsichtige Ortsangaben, ja, der da hinten bei der Mühle, ja der da vorne bei der Landspitze, unter der hohen Silberpappel, der tuts.

Ein warmer, diesiger Sommernachmittag und eine Frau, die spazieren geht, grauer Rock, schwarze Wolljacke, derbe Schuhe. Schwarzes Haar, aber nichts Ausländisches, beileibe nichts Jüdisches, hanseatische Aussprache und ein flaches niederdeutsches Gesicht. Kein biblischer Vorname im Pass, kein gelber Stern auf der Brust. Wenn man so aussieht,

braucht man keine Bekanntschaft zu scheuen und muss nicht alleine spazieren gehen. Renate war denn auch nicht allein, eine Dame aus ihrem Hotel, eine Frau Amtsgerichtsrat Soundso begleitete sie, unter den Apfelbäumen, die gut angesetzt hatten, gingen die beiden Frauen dahin, nicht langsam, nicht schnell. Die Frau Amtsgerichtsrat, die ein stark durchblutetes, fettes Gesicht hatte, bückte sich ab und zu, pflückte aus der Wiese eine Skabiose, eine Margherite, eine Sauerampferblüte, bald hielt sie einen hübschen Strauss in der Hand. Haben Sie Nachricht von Ihrem Sohn, fragte sie, und Renate sagte, Ja, danke, er ist jetzt im Mittelabschnitt, aber nicht ganz vorne, es geht ihm gut. Es ginge auch dem Kleinen gut, der war noch auf der Schule, in einem Internat in Norddeutschland, weit von hier. Ob er nicht einmal zu Ferien käme, fragte die Frau Amtsgerichtsrat, und Renate antwortete, doch, vielleicht schon am nächsten Sonntag, ein grosser Bub sei er bereits, bald grösser als sie selbst. Und sie selber sei wohl Witwe, fragte die Dame weiter. Renate sagte: Ja, aber keine Kriegswitwe, ihr Mann habe es am Herzen gehabt, vierzig Jahre alt, sei er plötzlich umgefallen, schon drei Jahre vor dem Krieg. Dieses Gerede ist idiotisch, dachte Renate, aber es ist besser, nicht allein zu gehen, man fällt nicht so auf. Wenn etwa später jemand die Frau Amtsgerichtsrat nach mir fragen sollte, wird sie sagen, dass wir zusammen spazieren gegangen sind, auch ein bischen gehamstert haben, ein Pfündchen Butter, ein Gläschen Honig, wer täte das nicht. Bald schon, in fünf oder zehn Minuten wollte Renata das vorschlagen, man könnte in den Bauernhäusern fragen, nicht wahr, für Ihren Jungen, für meinen Jungen, aber natürlich nicht zusammen, zwei bekommen nichts. Wenn sie ein bischen weiter waren, um den Hügel herum, da sieht man schon das Haus an der Landspitze, mit der grossen Pappel davor. Aber jetzt geht es erst den Hügel entlang, der Weg wird schmaler, wie hoch das Gras schon steht. Im hohen Gras kommt den beiden Frauen eine Familie entgegen, schön im Gänsemarsch, denn wer wagte auch nur einen Schritt auf die Wiese zu treten, die Bauern gehen mit geschwungener Sense auf das Fremdenpack zu los. Drei Leute waren es, die da entgegenkamen, an der Frau ging Renata noch vorüber, ohne recht hinzusehen, aber den Mann fasste sie ins Auge, der war so gar kein Spaziergänger, so stuben-

hockerisch unbeholfen, so abgrundtraurig liess er den Kopf hängen und zog das weinerliche Kind hinter sich her. Meine Familie, dachte Renata, mein Kind, und das hätte auch leicht sein können, denn was hatte sie in ihrem, im Büstenhalter versteckten Briefumschlag, nur einen Namen, Zahlen, ein Datum, aber keine Photographie. Sie blieb stehen und sah den Leuten nach, das Kind war ein Mädchen von etwa sechs Jahren, das drehte sich jetzt auch um und grinste ihr zu mit seinem Gnomengesicht und machte eine Bewegung mit der Hand, als wolle es Renata hinunterziehen unter das hohe Gras und dort mit ihr spielen, geduckt, ein winziges, unheimliches Spiel. Die haben es auch nötig, sagte die Frau Amtsgerichtsrat mütterlich und meinte die Nächte ohne Fliegeralarme, die Butterbrote, die gute Luft. Renate machte ein paar schnellere Schritte, ja, dachte sie, die haben es nötig, letzter gemeinsamer Spaziergang, Abschied fürs Leben, aber fragen darf man nicht, sich auch nicht noch einmal umdrehen, wenn alles gut geht, ist das Kind heute nacht in der Schweiz. Wenn alles gut geht, warum sollte es nicht gut gehen, sie hatte die richtige Adresse, jetzt sah man schon unter der hohen Pappel die glitzernden Wellen des Sees. Ein anderer Hof lag links, hoch über der Strasse. Sie versuchen es dort, wenn es Ihnen recht ist, ich da unten im Pappelhaus, was wir bekommen, teilen wir dann. Der Frau Amtsgerichtsrat war es recht, sie war voller Tatkraft, Hamstern ist unangenehm, aber doch ein spannendes Abenteuer und welche Freude, wenn man nachhause kommt und bringt ein Paar Eier mit, ein Säckchen Mehl. Als Renata, allein nun, den Pfad einschlug, der zum See hinunterführte, sah sie, dass nicht weit von dem Pappelhaus und ebenfalls am Seeufer noch ein anderes Fischer oder Bauernhaus lag, wie verwunschen hinter Büschen von Holunder und Hecken von wilden Rosen. Dort müsste man wohnen, dachte sie, der Nebel kommt übers Wasser, nichts mehr hören, nichts mehr sehen. Während sie weiter auf die Silberpappel zuing, starrte sie immerfort hinüber auf das andere Haus, in seltsamer Erregung, als sei gerade jenes Haus ihr eigentliches Ziel, als solle sich dort ihr Leben erfüllen. Es tat ihr plötzlich leid, dass sie so vorsichtig sein musste und mit niemanden über sich selbst sprechen durfte, auch nicht mit der Frau Amtsgerichtsrat, die eine gutmütige Person zu sein

schien. Ich will, hätte sie ihr gern gesagt, keine Butter, ich will etwas ganz anderes, ich habe an das jüdische Schicksal gebaut. Die Redewendung gefiel ihr, man hatte dabei etwas vor Augen wie ein Haus am Abgrund und tief unten braust es, trübes gurgelndes Wasser, das viele Trümmer, Baumstämme und zersplitterte Balken mit sich führt, und auch lebende Menschen, die ihre Arme hilfeflehend ausstrecken. Und man selbst war draussen, am sicheren Ufer und konnte hier und da jemanden herausziehen, weil man unverdächtig war, arisch, Mutter eines Soldaten, dazu reich. Dies alles hätte Renata sagen wollen und vielleicht auch erzählen, was alles ihr in dieser Beziehung schon zugemutet worden war und was sie klaren Verstandes und trotzigen Sinnes hatte erfüllen können, auch furchtlos, nur gerade heute ein wenig überdrüssig, mit ein wenig Sehnsucht nach Ruhe und Glück. Aber die Frau Amtsgerichtsrat war schon weit drüben am Hang, und zu trauen wäre ihr wahrscheinlich auch nicht gewesen, wem war noch zu trauen. Auch den Leuten im Pappelhaus, das Renata jetzt beinahe erreicht hatte, konnte nicht gleich die Wahrheit gesagt werden, man musste sich vortasten, nach Lebensmitteln, nach einem Zimmer, das man mieten wolle, fragen. Eine Frau trat gerade aus dem Haus und rief den Hund zurück, der schon seit geraumer Zeit bellte und an seiner Kette riss. Als Renata auf sie zuging und nach einem Zimmer fragte, starrte sie sie sonderbar ängstlich an und sagte, sie habe keines, auch keine Butter, auch keine Milch und Renata möge um Gottes willen gehen. Dieses Umgotteswillen hätte Renata stutzig machen müssen, aber sie war nun schon in Fahrt, sah die Boote und Netze und jenseits der matthblauen Fläche das andere Seeufer, friedlich und schön. Sie müsse, sagte sie, durchaus mit dem Mann sprechen, sie habe ihm Grüsse zu bestellen und ihm etwas auszurichten, und die Frau, eine grosse, schwere Person, sah Renata die ganze Zeit bedrückt und traurig an. Dann kommen sie also, sagte sie endlich und führte Renata in ein Zimmer zu ebener Erde, einer Art von guter Stube mit einem Tisch mit Stühlen darum herum und einem hässlichen Bufett und seltsamen grünen Schatten, als niste der Schwamm in der Wand. Sie ging dann fort, ihren Mann zu suchen und Renata setzte sich an den Tisch und holte einen Packen Geldscheine aus ihrer Umhängetasche und behielt sie in der Hand. Die

Standuhr gab einen hässlichen krächzenden Ton von sich und schlug dann viermal und durch die graue Müllgardine konnte Renata sehen, wie eine der Kühe draussen im Apfelgarten den Rücken krumm machte und das Wasser liess. Nach einer Weile trat der Fischer in die Stube, ein kleiner weissblonder Mann, mit blöden Fischaugen und einem verschwitzten Gesicht. Was wollen Sie, wer schickt Sie, fragte er unfreundlich, setzte sich auch garnicht und stützte nur die kleinen weissblauen Fäuste auf den mit einer seidenen Fransendecke behängten Tisch. Renata war plötzlich auf der Hut, es ist ja schliesslich egal, von wem ich es erfahren habe, sagte sie, aber ich weiss, dass Sie es tun. Dass ich was tue, fragte der Mann böse, ich tue nichts Unrechtes, Fräulein, da sind Sie falsch unterrichtet, und Renata meinte schon, sie habe wirklich das Haus verwechselt und zog die Hand mit dem Geld unauffällig auf den Schoss. Ich wollte ein Zimmer mieten, sagte sie, was ist denn dabei, und sah den Fischer lachend an. Sie wollten kein Zimmer mieten, sagte der Mann streng und blinzelte nach der Türe, wo jemand stehen musste, der ihm Zeichen machte. Gut, sagte Renata mit ihrem schönen freimütigen Blick, ich wollte kein Zimmer mieten, ich wollte für eine Fahrt bezahlen, und wenn Sie nicht fahren wollen, so können Sie mir vielleicht jemanden sagen, der es tut. Der Mann antwortete nicht, er sah immer noch auf die Tür in Renatas Rücken, sein Gesicht zuckte unwillig, aber dann sagte er plötzlich, komm her, und seine Frau kam lautlos näher und setzte sich und legte ihre starken fleischigen Arme auf den Tisch.

Sie sind doch, fragte sie, und sah Renata ängstlich an, allein hergekommen? Es hat Sie doch niemand auf dem Wege gesehen?

Doch, sagte Renata, es hat mich jemand gesehen, eine ganze Familie und ich bin auch nicht allein gekommen, sondern mit einer Dame aus meinem Hotel, die wartet jetzt auf der Strasse auf mich und wir gehen auch zusammen nachhaus.

Da siehst Du's, da hast Du's, sagte der Mann, und die Frau sah einen Augenblick lang sehr erschrocken aus und machte Mann eine Bewegung mit den beiden Händen, so, als ob ihre Hände zwei Wagschalen wären, von denen die eine stieg und die andere sank. Und Renata wusste auch, aber nicht jetzt, sondern erst sehr viel später, dass die Frau in diesem Augen-

blick wirklich etwas abgewogen oder eine Rechnung aufgemacht hatte und auf der einen Seite dieser Rechnung standen der Hof, die Boote und das Vieh, standen Leben und Freiheit und auf der andern Seite stand das Schicksal einer fremden Frau. Renata sah nur die Hand, die jetzt schwer auf den Tisch fiel und die der Mann packte und drückte, als wolle er seine Frau daran verhindern, noch etwas zu sagen. Er beugte sich jetzt auch vor und hing schräg über dem Tisch und Renata dachte, wo bin ich, so still ist es hier, wie auf dem Grunde des Sees. Sie fasste aber gleich neue Hoffnung, da der Mann ihr nun eine Adresse gab, ein Haus, wo sie hingehen sollte, nicht auf der Strasse, sondern auf dem schmalen Seeweg, zwanzig Minuten von hier. Das Haus sei schon vom Garten aus zu sehen, nur, dass man eben die Landzunge umgehen müsse, es sei der Busschhof, der Besitzer sei ein Bauer und Fischer, er habe zwei Boote und führe nachts auf den See.

Ein Haus in Holundergebüsch, fragte Renata, und lächelte, weil sie nun doch noch dorthin kommen sollte, an ihr eigentliches Ziel.

Ja, sagte der Mann rasch, und nun müsse sie gehen, seine Frau solle ihr noch den Weg zeigen und vor dem Hund brauche sie sich nicht zu fürchten, der sei an die Kette gelegt. Er schien es mit einemmal sehr eilig zu haben, Renata loszuwerden, fast drängte er sie mit den Händen zum Haus hinaus und tuschelte nur an der Türe noch mit seiner Frau. Die trottete wie ein Schlachtopfer vor Renata her, sagte nur, jetzt links, jetzt rechts, jetzt geradeaus, und das so leise, dass Renata, ehe sie um die Scheune bogen, noch ein Geräusch hörte, wie die Kurbel eines altmodischen Telefonapparates, und die Stimme des Fischers, die aber jetzt, wie mit Absicht gedämpft, ganz anders klang.

Er meldet mich an, dachte sie, aber ohne jeden Argwohn, nur das Gehaben der Frau war ihr merkwürdig, da diese ihr nur ein Gartenpförtchen aufstiess, auf einen Pfad im Schilf deutete und ohne ein Wort des Abschieds sich umdrehte und verschwand. Renata rief ihr ein Dankeswort nach und ging rasch weiter, es war ihr ärgerlich, dass sie nicht auf die Strasse zurückkehren und der Frau Amtsgerichtsrat hatte Bescheid sagen können, auf der Strasse schien überdies das Holunderhaus viel schneller erreichbar zu sein. Denn der Schilfweg, so

hübsch er war, schlängelte sich nicht nur um diese eine lange, sondern auch noch um mehrere andere kleine Landzungen, immer wieder verschwand das Haus vor Renatas Blicken und manchmal sah sie nichts anderes als diese grauen Wälder von Schilf und den bleichen Spiegel des Wassers, über den die kleinen schwarzen Blesshühner eilig nickend liefen. Einen Augenblick lang dachte sie, der Fischer habe sie vielleicht diesen Weg geschickt, um ihr zu folgen, barfuss, lautlos, rasch, und ihr das Geld abzunehmen, sie hätte ihn nicht anzeigen dürfen, sie war in seiner Hand. Sie begann zu laufen, das Herz schlug ihr heftig, fast mit Erleichterung hörte sie jetzt droben auf der Strasse ein Motorengeräusch, einen Wagen, der rasend heranfuhr und mit knirschenden Bremsen in der Nähe hielt. Da zeigten sich auch, und nun schon ganz nah, über dem Schilfkranz, die Holunderbüsche wieder. Renata ging langsamer, an das Haus dachte sie nun und erwog mit ihrem klaren hellen Verstand alle Möglichkeiten eines Kaufs, sah sich auch schon mit ihren jungen Söhnen auf einer unschwer zu errichtenden Altane über dem See sitzen, es sollte dann Schluss sein mit allen Rettungstaten, hier wollte sie bleiben und ihren Garten bebauen, bis der Krieg zu Ende war und der Spuk vorbei. Als das Dach und die gelbe Hauswand dann ganz plötzlich vor Renata auftauchten und sie auch einen alten Mann, der an einem aufgehängten roten Netz beschäftigt war, in geringer Entfernung vor sich sah, musste sie sich erst zur Ordnung rufen, so weit war es noch nicht, das Gnomenkind musste zuerst noch in Sicherheit gebracht werden, schon sah sie es nächtlich im Boot sitzen, in das rote Fischernetz gewickelt, ein feines Greisenhändchen schaute hervor. Dabei fiel ihr ein Geruch von Benzin auf und warnte sie oder hätte sie doch warnen können, wäre sie nicht so darauf aus gewesen, nun auch noch das Letzte hinter sich zu bringen, anständig, und dann ihren Frieden zu haben. So nahm sie aufs neue die Geldscheine aus der Tasche und ging, sie fest in den Fingern haltend, auf das rote Netz zu, an dem der Mann sass, einen uralten Hut auf dem Kopf und wunderbarlich still. Guten Abend, sagte sie und murmelte dann ihr Sprüchlein, ganz ohne Vorsicht diesmal, ein jüdisches Kind solle er diese Nacht über den See bringen und es solle sein Schaden nicht sein.

Eine Antwort bekam sie nicht und konnte sie auch gar-

nicht bekommen, das Haus war geräumt und die Bewohner waren verhaftet, der Mann im alten Hut war nur eine Vogelscheuche gegen das rote Netz gelehnt. Aber hinter dem Netz hervor kamen jetzt zwei schwarz Uniformierte und packten Renata bei den Armen, die Geldscheine fielen auf den Boden, die Falle schnappte zu.

In solchen Augenblicken denkt man an das Nebensächliche zuerst. Renata, die von den Männern in den hinter dem Haus versteckten Wagen gezerrt und stadtwärts gefahren wurde, dachte zuerst an die Frau Amtsgerichtsrat, dann an das Kind, dessen Eltern nun auf die erhoffte Nachricht vergeblich warten würden, zuletzt an sich selbst und um welchen hohen Preis sie gespielt hatte, um ihr Leben nämlich, nicht weniger, nicht mehr. Denn: Wie konnten Sie nur so etwas machen, sagten ihre schwarzen Begleiter ärgerlich, und nun sassen statt dieser rechts und links von ihr auf dem Rücksitz ihre Söhne und fragten, Mutter, wie konntest Du nur, und sie begriff nun auf einmal selbst nicht mehr, was alles, nämlich die Zukunft ihrer Buben, sie aufs Spiel gesetzt hatte für ein fremdes Kind. Habt keine Angst, flüsterte sie lächelnd und fuhr, eine Heldin unserer Zeit, in einer Staubwolke durch das süsse sommerliche Land, das Abendrot war warm, aber der grüne Nordhimmel war eisig kalt und Renata zog die schwarze Strickjacke fester um sich, zog auch den Gürtel fester, diesen langen weichen Wollgürtel, aus dem sie sich dann am Abend im Gefängnis die Schlinge knüpfte und in dem, als die Wärterin hereinkam, ihr klares tapferes Gesicht schon erloschen hing.

INGEBORG BACHMANN

JUGEND IN EINER ÖSTERREICHISCHEN STADT

An schönen Oktobertagen kann man, von der Radetzkystrasse kommend, neben dem Stadttheater eine Baumgruppe in der Sonne sehen. Der erste Baum, der vor jenen dunkelroten Kirschbäumen steht, die keine Früchte bringen, ist so entflammt vom Herbst, ein so unmässiger goldner Fleck, dass er aussieht, als wäre er eine Fackel, die ein Engel fallen gelassen hat. Und nun brennt er, und Herbstwind und Frost können ihn nicht zum Erlöschen bringen.

Wer, angesichts dieses Baum, möchte drum zu mir reden vom Blätterfall und vom weissen Tod, wer mich hindern, ihn mit Augen zu halten und zu glauben, dass er mir immer leuchten wird wie in dieser Stunde und dass das Gesetz der Welt nicht auf ihm liegt!

In seinem Licht ist jetzt auch die Stadt wieder zu erkennen, mit blassen genesenden Häusern unter dunklen Ziegelschöpfen, und der Kanal, der vom See hin und wieder ein Boot hineinträgt, das in ihrem Herzen anlegt. Wohl ist der Hafen tot, seit die Frachten schneller von Zügen und auf Lastwagen in die Stadt gebracht werden, aber von dem hohen Kai fallen noch Blüten und Obst hinunter aufs vertümpelte Wasser, der Schnee stürzt ab von den Ästen, das Tauwasser läuft lärmend hinunter, und dann schwillt er gern noch einmal an und hebt eine Welle und mit der Welle ein Schiff, dessen buntes Segel bei unserer Ankunft gesetzt wurde.

In diese Stadt ist man selten aus einer anderen Stadt gezogen, weil ihre Verlockungen zu gering waren; man ist aus

den Dörfern gekommen, weil die Höfe zu klein wurden, und hat am Stadtrand eine Unterkunft gesucht, wo sie am billigsten war. Dort waren auch noch Felder und Schottergruben, die grossen Gärtnereien und die Bauplätze, auf denen jahrelang Rüben, Kraut und Bohnen, das Brot der ärmsten Siedler, geerntet wurden. Diese Siedler hoben ihre Keller selbst aus. Sie standen im Grundwasser. Sie zimmerten ihre Dachbalken selbst an den kurzen Abenden zwischen Frühling und Herbst, und weiss Gott, ob sie ein Richtfest gesehen haben vor ihrem Absterben.

Ihren Kindern kam es darauf nicht an, denn die wurden schon eingeweiht in die unbeständigen Gerüche der Ferne, wenn die Kartoffelfeuer brannten und die Zigeuner sich, flüchtig und fremdsprachig, niederliessen im Niemandsländ zwischen Friedhof und Flugplatz.

*

In dem Mietshaus in der Durchlasstrasse müssen die Kinder die Schuhe ausziehen und in Strümpfen spielen, weil sie über dem Hausherrn wohnen. Sie dürfen nur flüstern und werden sich das Flüstern nicht mehr abgewöhnen in diesem Leben.

Die Durchlasstrasse hat ihren Namen nicht von dem Spiel, in dem die Räuber durchmarschieren, aber die Kinder dachten lange, das wäre so. Erst später, als die Beine sie weiter trugen, haben sie den Durchlass gesehen, die kleine Unterführung, über die der Zug nach Wien fährt. Hier mussten die Neugierigen hindurch, die zum Flugfeld wollten, über die Felder, quer durch die Herbststickereien. Jemand ist auf die Idee gekommen, den Flugplatz neben den Friedhof zu legen, und die Leute in K. meinten, es sei günstig für die Beerdigung der Piloten, die eine zeitlang Übungsflüge machten. Die Piloten taten niemand den Gefallen, abzustürzen. Die Kinder brüllten immer: Ein Flieger! Ein Flieger! Sie hoben ihnen die Arme entgegen, als wollten sie sie einfangen, und starrten in den Wolkenzoo, in dem sich die Flieger zwischen Tierköpfen und Larven bewegten.

Die Kinder lösen von den Schokoladetafeln das Silberpapier und flöten darauf « Das Maria Saaler G'läut ». Die Kin-

der lassen sich in der Schule von einer Ärztin den Kopf nach Läusen absuchen. Die Kinder wissen nicht, wieviel es geschlagen hat, denn die Uhr auf der Stadtpfarrkirche ist stehen geblieben. Sie kommen immer zu spät von der Schule heim. Die Kinder! (Sie wissen zur Not, wie sie heissen, aber sie horchen nur auf, wenn man sie « Kinder » ruft.)

Aufgaben: Unter- und Oberlängen, steilschriftig, Übungen im Horizontgewinn und Traumverlust, auswendig Gelerntes, auf Gedächtnisstützen. In der Ausdünstung von Ölböden, von ein paar Hundert Kinderleben, Zwergenmänteln, verbranntem Radiergummi, zwischen Tränen und Tadel, Eckenstehen, Knien und unstillbarem Schwätzen sind zu leisten: ein Alphabet und das Einmaleins, eine Rechtschreibung und zehn Gebote. Die Kinder legen alte Worte ab und neue an. Sie hören vom Berg Sinai und sie sehen den Ulrichsberg mit seinen Rübenfeldern, Lärchen und Fichten, von Zeder und Dornbusch verwirrt, und sie essen Sauerampfer und nagen die Maiskolben ab, eh sie hart und reif werden, oder tragen sie nachhause, um sie auf der Holzglut zu rösten. Die nackten Kolben verschwinden in der Holzkiste und werden zum Unterzünden verwendet, und Zeder und Ölbaum wurden nachgelegt, schwelten darauf, wärmten aus der Ferne und warfen Schatten auf die Wand.

Zeit der Trophäen, Zeit der Weihnachten, ohne Blick voraus, ohne Blick zurück. Zeit der Kürbisnächte, der Geister und Schrecken ohne Ende. Im Guten, im Bösen; hoffnungslos.

Die Kinder haben keine Zukunft. Sie fürchten sich vor der ganzen Welt. Sie machen sich kein Bild von ihr, nur von dem Hüben und Drüben, denn es lässt sich mit Kreidestrichen begrenzen. Sie hüpfen auf einem Bein in die Hölle und springen mit beiden in den Himmel.

Eines Tages ziehen die Kinder um in die Henselstrasse. In ein Haus ohne Hausherr, in eine Siedlung, die unter Hypotheken zahm und engherzig ausgekrochen ist. Sie wohnen zwei Strassen weit von der Beethovenstrasse, in der alle Häuser geräumig und zentralgeheizt sind, und eine Strasse weit von der Radetzkystrasse, durch die, elektrischrot und grossmäulig, die Strassenbahn fährt. Sie sind Besitzer eines Gartens geworden, in dem vorne Rosen gepflanzt werden und hinten kleine Apfelbäume und Ribiselsträucher. Die Bäume sind nicht grös-

ser als sie selber, und sie sollen miteinander gross werden. Sie haben links eine Nachbarschaft mit Boxerhund und rechts Kinder, die Bananen essen, Reck und Ringe im Garten aufgemacht haben und schwingend den Tag verbringen. Sie freunden sich mit dem Hund Ali an und rivalisieren mit den Nachbarskindern, die alles besser können und besser wissen.

Noch lieber sind sie unter sich, nisten sich auf dem Dachboden ein und schreien manchmal laut im Versteck, um ihre verkrüppelten Stimmen auszuprobieren. Sie stossen leise kleine Rebellschreie vor Spinnennetzen aus.

Der Keller ist ihnen verleidet von Mäusen und vom Apfelgeruch. Jeden Tag hinuntergehen, die faulen Bluter herausuchen, ausschneiden und essen! Weil der Tag nie kommt, an dem alle faulen Äpfel gegessen sind, weil immer Äpfel nachfaulen und nichts weggeworfen werden darf, hungert sie nach einer fremden verbotenen Frucht. Sie mögen die Äpfel nicht, die Verwandten und die Sonntage, an denen sie auf den Kreuzberg über dem Haus spazieren gehen müssen, Blumen bestimmend, Vögel bestimmend.

Im Sommer blinzeln die Kinder durch grüne Läden in die Sonne, im Winter bauen sie einen Schneemann und stecken ihm Kohlenstücke an Augenstatt. Sie lernen französisch. *Ma deleine est une petite fille. Elle est à la fenêtre. Elle regarde la rue.* Sie spielen Klavier. Das Champagnerlied. Des Sommers letzte Rose. Das Gebet einer Jungfrau.

Sie buchstabieren nicht mehr. Sie lesen Zeitungen, aus denen der Lustmörder entspringt. Er wird zum Schatten, den die Bäume in der Dämmerung werfen, wenn man von der Religionsstunde heimkommt, und er ruft das Geräusch des bewegten Flieders längs der Vorgärten hervor; die Schneeballbüsche und der Phlox teilen sich und geben einen Augenblick lang seine Gestalt preis. Sie fühlen den Griff des Würgers, das Geheimnis, das sich im Wort Lust verbirgt und das mehr zu fächten ist als der Mörder.

Die Kinder lesen sich die Augen wund. Sie sind übernünftig, weil sie abends zu lang im wilden Kurdistan waren oder bei den Goldgräbern in Alaska. Sie liegen auf der Lauer bei einem Liebesdialog und möchten ein Wörterbuch haben für die unverständliche Sprache. Sie zerbrechen sich den Kopf über ihre Körper und einen nächtlichen Streit im Elternzimmer. Sie lachen bei jeder Gelegenheit, sie können sich kaum

halten und fallen von der Bank vor Lachen, stehen auf und lachen weiter, bis sie Krämpfe bekommen.

Der Lustmörder wird aber bald in einem Dorf gefunden, im Rosental, in einem Schuppen, mit Heufransen und dem grauen Photonebel im Gesicht, der ihn für immer unerkennbar macht, nicht nur in der Morgenzeitung.

Es ist kein Geld im Haus. Keine Münze fällt mehr ins Sparschwein. Vor Kindern spricht man nur mehr in Andeutungen. Sie können nicht erraten, dass das Land im Begriff ist, sich zu verkaufen und den Himmel dazu, an dem alle ziehen, bis er zerreißt und ein schwarzes Loch freigibt.

Bei Tisch sitzen die Kinder still da, kauen lang an einem Bissen, während es im Radio gewittert und die Stimme des Nachrichtensprechers wie ein Kugelblitz in der Küche herumfährt und verendet, wo der Kochdeckel sich erschrocken über den zerplatzten Kartoffeln hebt. Die Lichtleitung wird unterbrochen. Auf den Strassen ziehen Kolonnen von Marschierenden. Die Fahnen schlagen über den Köpfen zusammen. « ...bis alles in Scherben fällt », so wird gesungen, draussen. Das Zeitzeichen ertönt, und die Kinder gehen dazu über, sich mit geübten Fingern stumme Nachrichten zu geben.

Die Kinder sind verliebt und wissen nicht, in wen. Sie kauderwelschen, spintisieren sich in eine unbestimmbare Blässe, und wenn sie nicht mehr weiterwissen, erfinden sie eine Sprache, die sie toll macht. Mein Fisch. Meine Angel. Mein Fuchs. Meine Falle. Mein Feuer. Du mein Wasser. Du meine Welle. Meine Erdung. Du mein Wenn. Und du mein Aber. Entweder. Oder. Mein Alles... mein Alles... Sie stossen einander, gehen mit Fäusten aufeinander los und balgen sich um ein Gegenwort, das es nicht gibt.

Es ist nichts. Diese Kinder!

Sie fiebern, sie erbrechen sich, haben Schüttelfrost, Angina, Keuchhusten, Masern, Scharlach, sie sind in der Krise, sind aufgegeben, sie hängen zwischen Tod und Leben, und eines Tages liegen sie fühllos und morsch da, mit neuen Gedanken über Alles. Man sagt ihnen, dass der Krieg ausgebrochen ist.

Noch einige Winter lang, bis die Bomben sein Eis hochragen, kann man auf dem Teich unter dem Kreuzberg schlittschuhlaufen. Der feine Glasboden in der Mitte ist den Mäd-

chen in den Glockenröcken, die Innenbogen, Aussenbogen und Achter fahren, vorbehalten; der Streifen rundherum gehört den Schnellläufern. In der Wärmestube ziehen die grösseren Burschen den grösseren Mädchen die Schlittschuhe an und berühren mit den Ohrenschützern das schwanenhalsige Leder über mageren Beinen. Man muss angeschraubte Kufen haben, um für voll zu gelten, und wer, wie die Kinder, nur einen Holzschlittschuh mit Riemen hat, weicht in die verwehten Teichecken aus oder schaut zu.

Am Abend, wenn die Läufer und Läuferinnen aus den Schuhen geschlüpft sind, sie über die Schultern hängen haben, abschiednehmend auf die Holztribüne treten und wenn ihre Gesichter, frisch und jungen Monden gleich, durch die Dämmerung scheinen, gehen die Lichter an unter den Schneeschirmen. Die Lautsprecher werden aufgedreht, und die sechzehnjährigen Zwillinge, die stadtbekannt sind, kommen die Holzstiege herunter, er in weissem Pullover und blauen Hosen, sie in einem blauen Nichts über dem fleischfarbenen Trikot. Sie warten gelassen den Auftakt ab, eh sie, von der vorletzten Stufe — sie mit einem Flügelschlag und er mit dem Sprung eines herrlichen Schwimmers — auf das Eis hinausstürzen und mit ein paar tiefen, kraftvollen Zügen die Mitte erreichen. Dort setzt sie zur ersten Figur an, und er hält ihr einen Reifen aus Licht, durch den sie, umnebelt, springt, während die Grammophonadel zu kratzen beginnt und die Musik zerscharrt. Die alten Herren weiten unter bereiften Brauen die Augen, und der Mann mit der Schneeschaukel, der die Langlaufbahn um den Teich kehrt, mit seinen von Lumpen unwickelten Füßen, stützt sein Kinn auf den Schaufelstiel und folgt den Schritten des Mädchens, als führten sie in die Ewigkeit.

Die Kinder kommen noch einmal ins Staunen: die nächsten Christbäume fallen wirklich vom Himmel. Feurig. Und das Geschenk dazu, das die Kinder nicht erwartet haben, ist freie Zeit.

Sie dürfen bei Alarm die Hefte liegen lassen und in den Bunker gehen. Später dürfen sie Süssigkeiten für die Verwundeten sparen oder Socken stricken und Bastkörbe flechten für die Soldaten, für die auf der Erde, in der Luft und im Wasser. Und derer gedenken, in einem Aufsatz, unter der Erde und auf dem Grund. Und noch später dürfen sie Laufgräben aus-

heben zwischen dem Friedhof und dem Flugfeld, das dem Friedhof schon Ehre macht. Sie dürfen ihr Latein vergessen und die Motorengeräusche unterscheiden lernen, den Umkreis errechnen, den ein Tiefflieger unter Feuer setzt. Sie müssen sich nicht mehr so oft waschen; um die Fingernägel kümmert sich niemand mehr. Die Kinder flicken ihre Sprungseile, weil es keine neuen mehr gibt, und unterhalten sich über Zeitzündler und Tellerbomben. Die Kinder spielen « Lasst die Räuber durchmarschieren » in den Ruinen, aber manchmal hocken sie nur da, starren vor sich hin und hören nicht mehr darauf, wenn man sie « Kinder » ruft. Es gibt genug Scherben für Hölle und Himmel, aber die Kinder schlottern, weil sie durchnässt sind und frieren.

Kinder sterben, und die Kinder lernen die Jahreszahlen von den siebenjährigen und dreissigjährigen Kriegen; es wäre ihnen gleich, wenn sie alle Feindschaften durcheinanderbrächten, den Anlass und die Ursache, für deren genaue Unterscheidung man in der Geschichtsstunde eine gute Note bekommen kann.

Sie begraben den Hund Ali und dann seine Herrschaft. Die Zeit der Andeutungen ist zuende. Man spricht vor ihnen von Genickschüssen, vom Hängen, Liquidieren, Sprengen, und was sie nicht hören und sehen, riechen sie, wie sie die Toten von St. Ruprecht riechen, die man nicht ausgraben kann, weil das Kino darüber gefallen ist, in das sie heimlich gegangen sind, um die « Romanze in Moll » zu sehen. Jugendliche waren nicht zugelassen, aber dann waren sie es doch, zu dem grossen Sterben und Morden ein paar Tage später und alle Tage danach.

Es ist nie mehr Licht im Haus. Kein Glas im Fenster. Keine Tür in der Angel. Niemand rührt sich und niemand erhebt sich.

Die Glan fliesst nicht aufwärts und abwärts. Der kleine Fluss steht, und das Schloss Zigulln steht und erhebt sich nicht.

Der heilige Georg steht auf dem Neuen Platz, steht mit der Keule, und erschlägt den Lindwurm nicht. Daneben die Kaiserin steht und erhebt sich nicht.

O Stadt. Stadt. Ligusterstadt, aus der alle Wurzeln hängen. Kein Licht und kein Brot sind im Haus. Zu den Kindern gesagt: Still, seid still vor allem.

In diesen Mauern, zwischen den Ringen, wieviel Mauern sind da noch? Der Vogel Wunderbar, lebt er noch? Er hat geschwiegen sieben Jahr. Sieben Jahr sind um. Du mein Ort, du kein Ort, über Wolken, unter Karst, unter Nacht, über Tag, meine Stadt und mein Fluss. Ich deine Welle, du meine Erdung.

Stadt mit dem Viktringerring und dem St. Veiterrering... Alle Ringstrassen sollen genannt sein mit ihrem Namen, wie die grossen Sternstrassen, die auch nicht grösser waren für Kinder, und alle Gassen, die Burggasse und die Getreidegasse, ja so hiessen sie, die Paradeisergasse, die Plätze nicht zu vergessen, der Heuplatz und der Heilige Geist Platz, damit hier alles genannt ist, ein für allemal, damit alle Plätze genannt sind. Welle und Erdung.

Und eines Tages stellt den Kindern niemand mehr ein Zeugnis aus, und sie können gehen. Sie werden aufgefordert, ins Leben zu treten. Der Frühling kommt nieder mit klaren wütenden Wassern und gebiert einen Halm. Man braucht den Kindern nicht mehr zu sagen, dass Frieden ist. Sie gehen fort, die Hände in ausgefransten Taschen und mit einem Pfiff, der sie selber warnen soll.

*

Weil ich, in jener Zeit, an jenem Ort, unter Kindern war und wir neuen Platz gemacht haben, gebe ich die Henselstrasse preis, den Blick auf den Kreuzberg, und nehme zu Zeugen all die Fichten, die Häher und das beredte Laub. Und weil mir zum Bewusstsein kam, dass der Wirt keinen Groschen mehr für eine leere Siphonflasche gibt und auch beim zehnten Mal keine Limonade ausschenkt, überlasse ich anderen den Weg durch die Durchlasstrasse und ziehe den Mantelkragen höher, wenn ich sie blicklos überquere, um hinaus zu den Gräbern zu kommen, ein Durchreisender, dem niemand seine Herkunft ansieht. Wo die Stadt aufhört, wo die Gruben sind, wo die Siebe voll Geröllresten stehen und der Sand zu singen aufgehört hat, kann man sich niederlassen einen Augenblick und das Gesicht in die Hände geben. Man weiss dann, dass alles war, wie es war, dass alles ist, wie es ist, und verzichtet, einen Grund zu suchen für alles. Denn da ist kein Stab, der

dich berührt, keine Verwandlung. Die Linden und der Holunderstrauch...? Nichts rührt dir ans Herz. Kein Gefälle früher Zeit, kein erstandenes Haus. Und nicht der Turm von Zigulln, die zwei gefangenen Bären, die Teiche, die Rosen, die Gärten voll Goldregen. Im bewegungslosen Erinnern, vor der Abreise, vor allen Abreisen, was soll uns aufgehen? Das Wenigste ist da, um uns einzuleuchten, und die Jugend gehört nicht dazu, auch die Stadt nicht, in der sie stattgehabt hat. Nur wenn der Baum vor dem Theater das Wunder tut, wenn die Fackel brennt, gelingt es mir, wie im Meer die Wasser, alles sich mischen zu sehen: die frühe Dunkelhaft mit den Flügen über Wolken in Weissglut; den Neuen Platz und seine törichte Denkmäler mit einer Piazza im Weinduft; die Sirenen von damals mit dem Liftgeräusch in einem Hochhaus; die trockenen Marmeladebrote mit einem Stein, auf den ich gebissen habe am Atlantikstrand.

CHRISTOPH MECKEL

ZWISCHENBLICK

*Im Auge des Elefanten sah ich morsche Häuser stehn,
Grosstädte der Finsternis voll Elefantenpest und Regen,
Mit Seufzerbrücken, Galgen, aufbrechenden Gräbern
Eines verborgenen Indien, — klagend
Trug er sie unter dem Lid beiseite.*

VERLORENE FIGUREN

*Wie fühlt ihr euch dort,
Verlorene Figuren,
In der Werkstatt des Unsichtbaren,
Mit allen Zaubermitteln des Verschweigens
Von Stimmen und Flügelschlägen?*

*Ich überwache den Umgang
Eurer grossen Füsse
In meinem Gedächtnis, ohne Gewähr
Für euer Abbild in seinen Spiegeln,
Eure Gestalten vergessen sich auszudrücken,
Chamäleone, verwechselbar
Mit dem Zwielficht von Lidern
Und Puppenscheiteln.*

*Wann rückt ihr euern Tod heraus
Aus den Dunkelkammern
Und wandert mit ihm
Vor die Tore des Vergessens
Wie ein Echo aus leeren Glocken —.*

BESUCH DES ENGELS

*Wenn der letzte Schnellzug kommt
An unsre gottverlassene Station,
Werden wir dich mit unsern Dienern empfangen,
Wir werden deine Koffer tragen
Und deinen Flügeln die Läuse lesen
Und dir ein billiges Himmelbett mieten
Im einzigen Hotel.*

*Unsere Diener werden
Um ein Trinkgeld betteln, wenn dein leerer
Klingelbeutel unterm Kittel klimpert,
Du wirst unsre Hunde taufen
Und mit unsern Vätern frierend
Um die leeren Samoware sitzen.*

*Wir, dem Ewigen entwöhnt,
Dem Staub verschworen, werden
Dir ein Ständchen Hallelujah singen,
Wenn wir, Hut in Händen,
Deiner Wunder warten und deinen
Segen versteigern und unseren Frauen
Deine schimmernden Flügel kaufen!*

DAS GROSSE SCHWEIGEN

*In meinem Gedächtnis sitzen sich gegenüber
Eulen und Krebse,
Auch Weberknechte und wilde Frösche
Starräugig und stumm.*

*Hier lassen Pfauen ihre Flügel welken,
 Trauermantel und Faultier
 Hängen darin und scheinen sich nicht zu kennen,
 Grosse Reiher an den Wänden
 Stehen sich gegenüber und schweigen.*

*O Fallada, am leeren Pfosten hangend,
 Was dächten wir davon, zu singen,
 Uns vorzusingen, Alter, uns vorzusingen —*

CHORAL

*Himmel, Wiege des Lichts
 Über den Dächern Chicagos,
 Breit stehen die Tage, weitgeöffnet
 Zwischen den engen Nächten Chicagos.*

*Winde, singend
 Über den Autofriedhöfen Chicagos,
 Nachtbahnen wandern durch die Keller Chicagos
 Und weitfahrende Züge schlingern
 In den staubigen Wanten Chicagos.*

*Regen, trommelnd
 In die Regentonnen Chicagos,
 Unter den Brücken murmeln die Steine,
 Singen die wilden Hunde Chicagos,
 Schnarchen die Fledermäuse Chicagos.*

*Wo Chicago auf steinerner Stelle tritt,
 Schürt der Wind den Staub
 In den Höfen Chicagos,
 Wo der Rattenengel fliegt,
 Durch die dröhnenden Keller fliegt,
 Durch die dröhnenden Keller Chicagos.*

*Himmel, Wiege des Lichts
Über den Dächern Chicagos —
Unter den Brücken murmeln die Steine
Singen die wilden Hunde Chicagos
Schnarchen die Fledermäuse Chicagos,*

*Himmel, Wiege des Lichts
Über den Dächern Chicagos!*

DIES IST DAS LAND

*Dies ist das Land
Der Schnee gruben, Pfalzen und Pferche,
Wo der Haifischküfig in Flüssen steht und die feuchten
Rattenseraills in Winterdämmerung versinken
Und der kahle Hungerberg
Balken und Bohlen aufnimmt und in steinerner
Sage versenkt.*

*Hier sind die Docks der Eisberge, hier
Fährt der Wind in der hallenden Nachhut des Schweigens
Über das Kar der Hagelkornmühlen,
Deren Schaufelräder durch das Rohr
Schimmernden Finsterwassers brechen.*

*Dies sind Galgen, Seen, Hundehütten,
Krötenkerker, Nachtigallkasernen
Leer im Land der zerbrochenen Sternstundenuhren,
Deren Glocken im Feuchten zerspellen, tonlose
Spinnenpaläste.*

REGEN

*Voll Regentinte stehen kalte Nächte
Schmal zwischen breiten Tagen voller Gold,
Nun springen Blitze von der Donnerwächte
Als Lichtlawine, die zu Tage rollt.*

*Ein Stern geht an den Wolkenmolen nieder,
Die Mondplakate wurden feucht und welk,
Die Flüsse kehren um und steigen wieder
Den tropfenden Gebirgen ins Gebälk.*

WIEDERKEHR

*Grund zur Wiederkehr waren ihm
Regen und Rauche; Kälte lockte,
Nebelhörner mit stockender Kranichkehle
Riefen ihn rauh
Von Bord der Walfischrücken.*

*Er verliess die Docks der Windlichtschiffe,
Querend Fischlagun und Maar,
Wetterleuchten füllte seines finstern
Landes Sonnenuhren, wo der Eisberg
Durch die Schleusen zog, auf winterleeren
Flüssen fahrend überland.*

*Grund zur Wiederkehr war Schnee und Stein ihm
Und war Wind aus Schweigens vollem Munde
Und war Fischgelächter moorumschlungen,
Vogelatem sausend.*

MARTIN WALSER

BILDERBOGEN I: STADT

Die Treppen reden durcheinander schlimmer als ein Baum voller Elstern. Auf den Oberleitungen tanzen Lilaflämmchen. Der Betrunkene setzt den Fuss viel zu weit voraus. An der Wand klebt wie ein Plakat ein Liebespaar. In Telephonzellen nicken Mädchen. Lächeln Mädchen. Duschen sich. Der Polizist auf dem Elefantenpodest dreht sich wie der Wetterhahn. Die Mutter, soweit sie sich vorbeugt, was der Junge vom Hof heraufruft, kann sie nicht hören. Aus hohlen Fässern lärmts ringsum. Auf dem Geländer sitzen zwei Vierzehnjährige und schauen gerade aus, als wüssten sie. Die Aktentaschen zappeln an den Händen. Unter den Arm geklemmt können sie dann nur noch leise schaben. Die Sonne wird nicht fotografiert, aber sonst. Ein Kirchturm dreht sich um und richtet das erste Wort an das Hochhaus. Der Briefkasten kotzt den Briefträger an. Einarmige Auskunftsbefragte legen den abgegrützten Finger an den Mund. Die Zeitung in der Strassenbahn liest sich laut langsam vor. Der Bettler nimmt den Fahnenmast und stochert sich im Zahn. Der Empfangschef raucht. Alle Tauben landen auf dem Platz, formieren sich zu Dreierreihen, stimmen das Marschlied an. Eine Einbahnstrasse bäumt sich auf, wird von der Putzfrau über die Teppichstange gehängt und geklopft. Zwei Bundeswehrrsoldaten auf einer Bank melken ihre Handschuhe, sehnsüchtig. Quer durchs Lokal schnell, von ihren Absätzen gestossen, eine Blondine. Vierzig Augen an der Leine. Auf seinem Plakat beginnt Tarzan zu onaniieren. Zwei Brauereipferde sehen ihm aufmerksam zu. Es raucht der Empfangschef. Die Züge kriechen dem Bahnhof in den

Mund. Dächer setzen Mast und Segel. Alle schauen auf die Ampeln. Tauben marschieren. Jetzt ist es Zeit. Reden die Treppen. Der Photograph ist eingeschlafen. Eine Puppe brennt. Signale. Wie immer, von Kindern geblasen. Es wird sich nichts ändern.

BILDERBOGEN II: EINLADUNG

Wir tun, als seufzten wir, und gehen hin. Blumen werden, abgegeben wie Waffen an der Loge des Bordells. Gastgeber wiederholen, was einem der Spiegel zuhause schon sagte. Das Neue wird vorgestellt: Duchesse. Angenehm. Alpacca. Ganz meinerseits. Mit Händereiben ins Zimmer, als wärens die letzten Schritte vor der Badewanne. Die Möbel hören sofort auf zu flüstern, richten Kellnergesichter auf uns. Wer durchschaut wen. Gastgeber singen das Duett vor uns Fachleuten. Otto ist mit seiner Frau verheiratet. Der Text ist bekannt. Ottos Frau ist blonder als sie beabsichtigt haben kann. Die Friseurin kann griechisch mit den Händen. Gedanken auf die rechte Fahrbahn, Zunge auf die linke. Unfallsicher. Parallelen schneiden sich ja nicht auf dieser Welt. Ich bin Ottos Freund. Je nachdem. Peter zum Beispiel überschätzt ihn. Die Gläser wissen einander schonend zum Klingen zu bringen. Peter ist nicht verheiratet. Um seinetwillen muss man's ihm übelnehmen. Tritt immer mit sechs Freundinnen auf, dann sieht er aus wie ein Kronleuchter. Der Blick der Frauen wird Mondstahl und beginnt höflich zu morden. Ihr Mund wird klein wie ein Fächer, der zusammenklappt. Die Männer haben ihre Autos mitgebracht, und lassen die reden. Wir sind der Ansicht, dass wir der Ansicht sind. Darum schliessen wir uns unserer Meinung an. Wir würden jedesmal alle einladen, aber worüber soll dann gesprochen werden. Franz-Josef liess seiner Frau einen Mantel aus der Haut seiner Geschäftspartner machen. Man bietet ihr immer gleich drei Stühle an. Sie hat Knoten in der Brust. Es erhebt sich die Frage, wer nächstes Jahr den Rechtsaussen finanziert. Franz-Josefs Frau öffnet den Mund schon, wenn ihre Hand die Gebäckschale noch gar nicht verlassen hat. Über die Russen weiss man soviel wie über Krank-

heiten, die man nicht selbst hat. Ach, seit im Waldhotel der Koch gewechselt hat. Wir sehen ein, dass wir einsehen. Unsere Nachbarn, das sind die Tiere mit dem rosaroten Rüssel auf der Stirn, Sie haben sie sicher schon gesehen; Chruschtschow lacht wie Eisenhower vor drei Jahren. Franz-Josef zieht einen Schuldner aus der Westentasche und drückt ihn im Aschenbecher aus. Seine Frau atmet tief ein. Stundungsvergleich, Erlassvergleich, und wo bleiben die Kinder des Gläubigers. Franz-Josef zieht sie aus der Brusttasche und badet sie zärtlich im Sektklas. Die Lampen im Zimmer, von feiner Rasse, edelkrumm, sehen einander an. Die Frauen beginnen ihre Wäsche auf den Tisch zu legen, aber die Männer essen sie, bevor etwas deutlich wird, Stück für Stück sofort auf und lächeln einander kauend an. Komplizen. Wenn über die Ehe gesprochen wird, bekommt Gott Bauchweh. Die Zungen klöppeln Verzierungen. Verzierungen. Servietten für die Toten. Dieses Zimmer werden wir nie mehr verlassen. Geben Sie sich keine Mühe, das Dienstmädchen morgen früh wird uns alle aufräumen.

FRANZ WURM

DAS ANGEBROCHENE HAUS

Geschrieben einer Freundschaft ins Geviert

Erde, aber sie schmilzt unter jedem Gerüst: räumt die Wurzeln zur Luft, krümmt sie zu Füßen. Gärten kommen in Gang. Wo Mauern die Stätte einsetzten, buckelt der Sand, zieht Wirbel, ebnet sich. Dass wir unheimlich sind: waren wir so hungrig?

Drunten schwelt die Dunkelheit. Glut oder Fäulnis, es ist ein Schimmer unter jedem Schritt.

Wir setzen den Meissel an unsere Geduld und treiben sie hervor bis sie sich löst. Was uns verlässt, ist Warten; dann führt Ruhe uns ein reicheres Werkzeug zu, ohne Schläge, und biegt uns die Hände aufwärts, zur Stirn. Die Steine fügen sich, und um den Atem wächst der Bau.

Erfinden; aber den Herd nicht zum Messer machen, und über allem Schläfe glühend sein.

Quelle ist Uebergang. Wo der Stein sie ausspricht, empfängt sie Neigung, tropft Licht in ihren Durst. Wie das Geschöpf doch übergeht, die Augen zu voll für Erinnerung! Wird, wer sie erhört, sie bewahren? Auf den Kissen verlöschen die Spuren, in Ufer graben sie sich ein. Wo Wasser geht, ist Schwelle.

Grabe nicht tiefer als deine Not ist. Schätze sind Anker. Lichte sie.

Der Glanz der Tiere, wenn sie den Hof umstreichen, borgt uns ein Licht, aus dem wir vergessen sind. Witterung sein ohne Stimme, das jetztige Ohr ein Nerv zwischen dem Umgang des Winds und dem Korn in der Brust, — so, unverschlüsselt vor allem, was zu gewärtigen ist: Gestalten, nicht Namen.

Die Sonne nistet auf dem First. Warum ist der Himmel so tief? Schenkt Worte, brecht Fenster!

Wo die Türe hinkommt, ist noch Durchgang; wo der Balken sich anstrengt unter der Last, zittert schon Zeit, und Gerät und Geratenes gehn auseinander zu zweierlei Wohnung. Aber im Hof ist noch Wind, und unter den Fliesen das Gras kennt kein Erlöschen.

HORST BIENEK

GEDICHTE

Angeklagt waren alle.

Aber nur einer von ihnen

Bekannte sich schuldig.

Die andern zerstörten der Stille Geräusch

Mit Klage und Fluch

Und der tödlichen Wünsche Verwesung.

Sie verteidigten sich,

Aber sie verteidigten nicht ihre Städte

Und nicht den lautlosen Vogelflug,

Indes die Angst sie mit Messern besonnte.

Unschuldig aber war nur einer.

Der sich schuldig bekannte.

ASCHENMORGEN

Aschenmorgen

Im Lid deines Auges gefangen,

Landschaft

Von Erinnerung verwüstet:

In die Netzhaut geritzt

Der Schatten eines fliehenden Vogels,

Der verwandelte Tod Arlequins

Und die feindliche Schrift der Reklamen,

Eine Flasche im lauernden Grün des Absinths

*Und die unbemannten Schiffe,
Die heimlich deinen Atem verlassen.*

*Aschenmorgen
Lässt sich in deinen Augen nieder
Und die sinnlos gezähmte Verzweiflung
Wandelt in deines Bluts Labyrinth.*

Wann aber entlässt mich das Exil deiner Wünsche?

DIE GELBE LANDSCHAFT

*Die Landschaft eilt sanft mit Rehfüssen dahin:
Gelb ist der Vorhang, der eure Augen verschliesst.
Gelb sind die Weiden, wenn die Erinnerungen aufsteigen.
Gelb auch werden alle Winde sein,
Wenn sie nicht mehr Wind zu sein brauchen.*

*Nicht immer regnet es,
Wenn die Landschaft ihre Gesetze verkündet.
Nicht immer verwirrt
Ihr Anblick die Liebenden.
Die Anarchie eurer Körper
Ist sie bereit zu verhüllen,
Doch das Blut, das eure Lippen sprengt,
Vermag sie nicht zu versklaven.
Nirgends ist eure Seele so klar wie hier,
Wo das Auge die Gräser berührt
Und die heroische Erde die Zunge fesselt.*

*Wenn ihr morgen aus den Wäldern tretet
Und schwarze Verwünschungen
Euch in Rudeln umkreisen,
So wisset:
Die Urformel allen Lebens zu finden ist schwer —
Aber dazwischen liegt Gelb.
Fürchtet euch nicht!
Der Weg ist weit,
Aber nicht alles ist gelb.*

Die Landschaft trägt euch sanft mit Rehfüssen dahin.

EINST WAR ICH BERG

*Einst war ich Berg,
Jetzt bin ich Fluss geworden.
Ich fühl so alt
Als wär ich Euphrat oder Tigris.*

*Als Du noch bei mir warst,
Beschworen wir gemeinsam die Gewitter
Und alle Feuer, die auf Erden wohnten,
Wandelten herbei an Abenden,
Die uns die Liebe fragmentarisch machte.
Du warst so seltsam dann,
Sprachst nur von Königen und Päpsten
Und fragtest mich verwundert,
Ob ich nicht auch den Mond gekreuzigt sähe?
Und wenn ich schwieg
Hast du Symbole in den Sand gemalt:
Die Sphinx und Ammon-Raa und Aaron-Stäbe.*

*Und als die Sonne über uns verblutete,
Versuchtest du die Wunden
Im Kalmus der Gebete sanft zu stillen.
Da schickten sie die Pfeile in die Städte
Und du sankst sterbend auf die Knie
Von ihren stummen Schüssen roh durchbohrt.
Ihr Sieggeschrei war laut wie alle Feste
Als eine neue Sonne sie am Horizont befestigten.*

*Erschreckt bin in die Wälder ich geeilt,
Hielt lange mich verborgen
Im Schatten eines fliehnden Rehes.*

*Einst war ich ICH,
Jetzt bin ich Fluss geworden.
Ich fühl so alt
Wie Euphrat oder Tigris.*

DIEGO VALERI

SETTE POESIE

1

*Come va sciolta l'acqua, come fugge
da se stessa e da tutto. E come canta,
come senza fine canta,
lunga e distesa nella chiusa notte.
Quasi una voce di speranza
che meni a un varco d'ignorata luce
oltre quel buio muro d'orizzonte.*

2

*Il tempo che ci porta ci rapisce
all'amor di noi stessi,
al mondo ci ridona. E già vicino
è il dì che il nostro cuore sarà tutto
delle cose innocenti; come quando
nacemmo. Senza peso
di pensiero: soltanto
gioia d'essere al mondo, tra le cose.*

3

*La sera a poco a poco
si distendeva prona,
bocca nell'erba, sopra la pianura.*

*Si perdevano le confuse forme
dei grandi alberi curvi lungo il fiume.
Spenta anche l'acqua: solo un tenue segno
del suo giro. Poi prese a luccicare
una stella. Poi tutto il gelsomino
del cielo s'incurvò sul letto d'ombra
col suo nitido pullulio di fiori.*

4

*Occhi, prendete! I meli tutti fiori
e foglie, i pioppi vestiti d'un velo
d'acqua tremula, e questo acceso cielo
dietro la tenda opaca dei vapori,*

*sono la grazia di un'ora che fugge
come fuggono i venti dell'aprile,
sono una essenza fragile e gentile
che ride e splende, e subito si strugge.*

5

*Restano, di quei giorni, un lume un suono
sciolti e fermi nel tempo. C'è l'argentea
bava del mare su l'opaca fiamma
della sabbia, e l'immenso lampeggiare
degli azzurri d'intorno.
E i morbidi susurri
delle ondine, nel riso alto perduto
delle sfere celesti. E un bianco viso
d'angelo: quello, forse, che da dentro
mi guarda; o quello assorto,
solo lassù, della diurna luna.*

6

*Piove ombra, cenere piove.
Morta è l'estate, converso in polvere*

*calda il suo gran corpo d'oro.
 Piove ombra bigia, cenere d'estate.
 Un vento molle di larghe folate
 soffia chissà da dove.
 Ansima il mare e spuma stanco.
 Di mortali dolcezze il cielo è bianco.*

7

*Dopo la pioggia brilla un sole
 d'improvviso staccato dalle cose,
 salito in cima al cielo,
 di là dal cielo, com'esule, assente
 dalla terra che ancora è verde e calda.
 Vive la terra; ma spogliata
 di peso dentro i suoi fermi contorni
 d'alberi e case; e sono i suoi colori
 splendidi senza raggio. (Laggiù, un grido
 rosso di salvie, stranamente muto).*

GUGLIELMO PETRONI

LE MACCHIE DI DONATO

Tenendo il pacchetto appoggiato al petto non s'era accorto che due fragole erano scivolate fuori e gli avevano macchiato la camicia. Le fragole profumavano d'erba, di prato e lui certamente divagava. Ora però, essendosi reso conto che il bianco della camicia era contaminato, benché nessuno potesse vedere i due punti rossi sui quali teneva il cartoccio con la maggior cura possibile, l'assalì uno sgomento insensato; sentì perfino una vampa di rossore alle guance. Affrettò il passo col volto un po' contratto, le labbra strette e più pensava che due piccole macchie sulla camicia non sono nulla di preoccupante, più il disagio si faceva sottile e profondo. — Che importano due macchie? — Ma lo sapeva bene che era stupido pensare questo, perché non poteva servirgli assolutamente a niente; sapeva bene che per togliersi da dosso quella specie di orgasmo senza significato doveva magari lottare ore e ore, se non giorni interi, doveva trovare, come già in tant'altre occasioni analoghe, il capo di una assurda matassa da sdipanare, ed a volte era inutile cercarlo di proposito, se non capitava per caso. — Forse queste due macchie saranno le mie lettere scarlatte — si disse, perché era uomo di buone e assidue letture; voleva con ciò illudersi d'aver risolto il suo problema con una battuta quasi spiritosa, ma invece il suo disagio aumentava d'intensità e fece pressoché di corsa l'ultimo tratto verso casa.

Si cambiò la camicia e si affrettò a chiamare la zia. Dovet-

te annunciarle la cosa in un tono perlomeno inadeguato se la piccola vecchia signora si mise a ridere strizzando i piccoli occhi neri, avanti di cominciare a parlare con quel tono che faceva sempre dubitare avesse precedentemente preparato la risposta.

« Fa lo stesso » disse la zia « ora ci sono degli smacchiatori che riescono a far scomparire qualsiasi macchia. Debbono essere invenzioni americane e sono miracolosi. Son cambiati i tempi, certe cose son divenute facili facili. Quando scendi in città fermati all'angolo del vicolo delle Scale, proprio sull'angolo c'è un banchetto, appena affacciato sul Corso, con tanta roba americana, ci sono anche due o tre tipi di smacchiatori, prendi quello che cancella le macchie di frutta ».

— Ride, maledetta! — pensò Donato; ma un sussulto interno l'avvertì all'insensata ingiustizia. Che voleva di più? Non era lei l'unico sostegno di tutta la sua esistenza? Non era lei che gli aveva assicurata quella sua vita assai oziosa, non era lei attenta ad ogni sua necessità, ad ogni suo umore, non era lei che a volte pareva perfino particolarmente intelligente nel venirgli in soccorso, ogniquale volta si sentiva morire nella vita e in se stesso? Quante volte ormai aveva concluso che se, tutto sommato, poteva dirsi un uomo sereno e senza serie difficoltà da sormontare, lo doveva alla zia che vegliava accuratamente su di lui. Del resto Donato era sempre stato gentile con lei, gentile ma non premuroso, perché la zia non aveva alcun bisogno di premure particolari. Se qualche volta una imprecazione saliva alla sua mente con veemenza, come in quest'ultimo caso, eran queste cose che restavano sepolte nella sua coscienza e non potevano avere grande importanza.

Donato ha una certa fretta di venire in possesso dello smacchiatore e cammina svelto verso la città; ma sul ponte sopra il fiume si ferma perché così ha sempre fatto: si ferma a guardare la benna che scava ghiaia e la carica sui camion, da quell'immagine poi alza lo sguardo, perché sul fiume c'è una luce verde che è come una strada di quiete che ondeggia tra le blue curve sponde alberate. Non c'è nulla di male che Donato si commuova ogni volta che si ferma là, anche se ormai conosce tutto troppo bene; non c'è nulla da dire se riceve da quello spettacolo, specialmente nelle ore della sera, una se-

greta tenera felicità che null'altro della sua solitaria fortunata vita riesce a procurargli. È come sdoppiarsi, scivolare sul canale d'aria sopra le acque: tutto il suo essere in quel momento si raffredda piacevolmente come se contenesse un calore che, in realtà, non può dire d'aver mai sentito bruciare nelle proprie vene. Per un attimo si perde quando attraversa il fiume, poi riprende la strada e generalmente si sente meglio.

All'angolo del vicolo delle Scale, naturalmente proprio nella precisa maniera descritta dalla zia, c'era il banchetto di cose americane che faceva capolino sul Corso. Sostò a lungo a guardare ogni oggetto in vendita; la sua curiosità fu attratta dai rasoi elettrici, dalle camicie che non hanno mai bisogno di essere stirate, da alcune fiaschette di metallo che si possono portare nella tasca dei pantaloni senza che ingombrino e da molte altre cose che lo distrassero felicemente: « Questi americani quante ne inventano » disse compiaciuto al venditore ritirando lo smacchiatore che faceva al caso suo, adatto per le macchie di ruggine, di tintura di jodio, di inchiostro, di frutta e di sangue. « Questi americani » aveva ripetuto il venditore. Tutte le merci avevano una bella forma ed erano avvolte in involucri di bei colori; per lui quello spettacolo conduceva ad un mondo irreali nel quale intravedeva una assurda malinconica felicità, intravedeva immagini che non gli erano familiari perché era come se le guardasse da una epoca remota. « Certo, questi americani » concluse salutando il venditore. Tornando, naturalmente al ponte si fermò di nuovo; ormai era notte, ma ciò che perdeva la vista lo acquistava l'udito: le acque sotto il ponte sussurrano, si sente un andare infinito, un flusso costante, così in contrasto col flusso della vita che si può ascoltare dentro di noi, da poter cogliere il disagio che ne nasce nel tentativo di sentirsi in qualche modo d'accordo con quel correre struggente, che purtuttavia somiglia a qualche cosa che in noi c'è e che scorre come una perdita continua di vita.

Donato conosce fin troppo bene questo affievolirsi d'ogni volontà vitale, sono i momenti in cui si spegne tutto, in cui può passare giorni interi come se camminasse nel buio. Donato è abituato ad esaminarsi con un certo distacco per valutare imparzialmente queste tortuosità del suo essere, avrebbe potuto riprodurle in un grafico come quello dei sismografi, e

come quello degli elettrocardiogrammi; un grafico che dopo aver proceduto per un tempo indeterminato con una regolarità monotona e assurda, si alza verso punte notevoli per ricadere in curve violentemente discendenti. Sapeva che una vita come la sua, per quanto ne potevano conoscere gli altri, doveva essere considerata una esistenza di un tedio più che notevole; ma lui non era di questo parere: era grato alla zia che lo aveva educato, d'averlo condotto così pianamente come se fosse stato accompagnato alla conclusione senza aver mai iniziato il cammino che vi conduce. Quella inquietudine interna che lui solo conosceva e, malgrado tutto forse coltivava, in definitiva le era valsa a supplire tutto ciò che sembrava essergli mancato: era la sua esperienza viva che gli permetteva di capire molto di ciò che la sua esistenza effettiva nemmeno gli aveva mai proposto. Si può aver ricostruito molto anche se si rimane degli esclusi, quando parecchi dei misteri che ci restano lontani li sentiamo salire dal segreto dell'anima, dalle viscere forse. Questo era presso a poco un pensiero che aveva già formulato fin dagli anni dei suoi studi universitari, quando era una promessa nel campo della chimica industriale.

Portò immediatamente lo smacchiatore alla zia pregandola: « Subito, subito proviamo ». « Proviamo subito » aveva risposto lei abituata ad accondiscendere sempre alle sue richieste. Quando, con la prodigiosa precisione dei misteri della chimica moderna che lui ben conosceva, vide le macchie sparire in un attimo, si sentì segretamente esaltato come se avesse assistito ad una tenebrosa alchimia. Respirò profondamente e si sentì leggero, liberato e felice.

* * *

Donato non l'avrebbe creduto prima, aveva sempre coltivato l'idea che la sua vita sarebbe sempre stata quella; esemplare ed assai vuota, priva di atti che non corrispondessero ai precedenti senza soluzione di continuità. Ma ora che aveva netta la sensazione che proprio tutto non si può prevedere, si era trovato costretto a riepilogare per l'intera notte senza prender sonno. Riviveva quell'ora e, nel ricostruirla, una sofferenza speciale per lui, l'assaliva alla gola: tutta la notte oppresso e preso per intero da una specie di sensibilità lucida,

non sapeva capacitarsi. Non aveva certo bisogno di domandarsi di che cosa si trattava, malgrado tutto era tutt'altra cosa che un ingenuo.

La ragazza si era seduta subito vicino a lui ed aveva chiesto:

« È laureato, vero, signor Donato? »

« Sì, sono chimico industriale », aveva risposto come se avesse dichiarato che era un abitante della luna. Lei aveva cercato di parlare comunque e voleva sapere della chimica industriale; ma Donato aveva eluso le sue richieste perché si annoiava. Zitto però non poteva stare e pur sapendo della inutilità della sua richiesta aveva domandato:

« E lei che fa? »

« Io? che vuole che faccia, sto in casa » ed aveva fatto un gesto mostrando madre e padre e sorella che sedevano poco più avanti dinanzi alla televisione. « Vorrei ben fare qualche cosa » aveva poi aggiunto. Donato si era domandato a quale uso poteva servire quella specie di creatura anonima di cui scorgeva solo due gote troppo rosse e basta, due fianchi enormi e basta, un petto grandemente rotondo e troppo maturo e null'altro, due occhi piccoli e nient'altro, nemmeno lo sguardo pareva ci fosse. A che cosa poteva servire un essere così? Il fatto era però che esso emanava un calore poco comune, un vero calore fisico che pareva pian piano penetrare nelle ossa di chi le stava vicino, e lui le era troppo vicino, i loro corpi si toccavano un poco.

Era quel calore che, a sua insaputa, si era portato dietro, che non lo aveva fatto dormire, che gli aveva impedito di continuare la lettura di *India, Messico, Cina* di Carlo Cattaneo. A dir la verità, a tratti quasi sentiva un certo schifo, come se sulla pelle gli fosse rimasto un odore animale dal quale si sentiva intossicato, mortificato in quella che era la sua limpidezza; ma non bastava, anzi proprio quella sensazione pressoché ripugnante riusciva a penetrare a fondo e scuoteva proprio quelle fibre più segrete che avevano sempre vibrato in ben altro modo, apportando al grafico delle variazioni diverse da tutte quelle già sperimentate. Quello che provava l'offendeva, ma rimaneva attaccato a lui con una tenacia maledetta, tutta in contrasto col suo essere. Al mattino già si era prepa-

rato alle domande della zia che con prontezza avrebbe visto che non aveva dormito. A colazione infatti la vecchia chiese:

« Come stai? »

« Bene ».

« Non hai dormito ».

« Esco a fare una passeggiata ».

« Senti... aspetta.. » Ma non l'ascoltò; sapeva quanto avrebbe parlato e non voleva prestarsi questa volta. Non aveva mai fatto così con lei, non si era mai sottratto; ma questa volta non rispose al richiamo e fu per lui come un violento atto ribelle, quel pacato allontanarsi di cui formalmente la zia non avrebbe più parlato.

Scese fin oltre gli argini del fiume, benché non amasse il disagiata camminare sui ciottoli, andò molto oltre seguendo i rivoli minori. Là si era dentro il fiume, là la magia di un'ora trascorsa perdutamente era facile, almeno per lui, come forse è facile per l'attore l'abito del proprio personaggio quando le luci della ribalta gli percuotono il volto. Poi a casa la giornata trascorse come mille altre, meno l'acuto ricordo che, pur sepolto, Donato intuiva vivo come un animale che avesse trovato la propria tana in qualche parte del suo corpo.

Un altro giorno eppoi, quasi non volendo e pareva che un altro parlasse al suo posto, Donato disse alla zia, appena finito di cenare: « Vado a vedere la televisione dai Donadio ».

« Vai Donato », rispose la donna come se fosse una cosa abituale; ma lui lo sapeva che tale non poteva apparire alla zia. Ritornare là dopo due giorni dal primo invito accettato su suo consiglio per evitare la scortesia d'un rifiuto, per evitare che una volta di più i vicini avessero da parlare e riparlare della sua ritrosia, della sua insocevolezza, della sua scortesia e quest'ultima in realtà sarebbe stata una calunnia, perché nei limiti dell'indispensabile, lui era di una cortesia assai esemplare. Andò quella sera, la sera appresso ed altre ancora. Tornava ogni volta con la bocca amara, stentava a prender sonno, era perseguitato da un certo spasimo che era anche nausea; ma l'attrazione sempre più oscura di quelle ore trascorse accanto alla giovane Donadio ingigantiva nella stessa misura che una specie di spirituale repulsione s'illuminava nella sua mente.

Ciò che addirittura ormai aveva maturato in cuor suo non somigliava a nulla di quello a cui aveva affidato con tanta fiducia la propria esistenza; ma era inutile, la contraddizione stessa pareva un elemento in più a favore della decisione cieca a cui era spinto paurosamente, non senza una qualche torbida delizia. La zia taceva, non aveva mai taciuto quando, con la sua famosa capacità di leggergli dentro, s'era trattato di cose anche minime; ora taceva benché, come sempre, anche un suo solo batter di ciglia corrispondesse ad una caparbia domanda, ad un soccorso. Questo suo stesso tacere di cui eran tutti e due chiaramente consapevoli, più che l'esitazione solita questa volta suscitava in Donato maggior decisione, ed anche questo era un tratto contrastante con ogni esperienza passata.

La zia taceva, avrebbe parlato lui allora; perciò decise di rimanere a casa. Avevano appena finito di cenare e, come tante volte, avevano approfittato di quell'occasione per esaminare qualche conto della banca, per decidere qualche ordine da dare al fattore, tanto più che Donato era mancato per molte sere di seguito ed alcune cose si erano accumulate: ora il lavoro era finito e la zia taceva. Quando il loro silenzio andò oltre la misura giusta, ad arte e improvvisamente Donato disse:

« Zia, parlerò ». Una frase che avrebbe dovuto risvegliare tutta l'attenzione della vecchia; ma come lui aveva preveduto, essa alzò soltanto il visino tenero e piccolo ed invece di invitarlo a parlare rispose:

« Non vai a vedere la televisione? ». Era come se già fosse entrata nel vivo del discorso saltando ogni preambolo: questa era la zia riconoscibile.

« Stasera ho deciso di parlarti di una cosa che penso da qualche tempo ». La vecchia attese muta con una espressione sempre più dolce, preparava ogni possibile risposta, ma forse non sapeva ancora bene che cosa avrebbe dovuto dire: così dubitava Donato. « Chiederò alla più giovane delle Donadio di sposarmi ». La zia rimase in silenzio. « Ci ho pensato assai; in fondo dovresti esserne contenta, potremmo fare una vita meno... meno... » la parola non veniva, scelse poi quella meno adatta, la più banale: « meno noiosa ». Apparentemente la zia non reagiva ancora, generalmente avara di gesti, teneva

sempre le mani sulle ginocchia quando parlava; ma ora lentamente alzò le braccia, le lasciò ricadere pesantemente, curvò la schiena preparandosi a sopportare un grande peso, infine parve rinunciare ancora a parlare.

« Non hai nulla da dire? ».

« Non posso essere contenta. Ma tu hai diritto ad una spiegazione che avrei preferito non doverti mai dare ».

« Che vuoi dire? ».

« È un lungo discorso; ma ti risparmierei tutti i particolari; a suo tempo, verranno da sé se tu lo desideri. Cercherò di dirti quello che tengo solo per me dal giorno che sei nato, con meno parole possibili. Fino ad oggi ho fatto del mio meglio e tu non puoi nemmeno immaginare che cosa sia l'intrigo di un pensiero che è solo tuo e non puoi dirlo a nessuno. Ho fatto del mio meglio affinché tutto andasse per un certo verso, vi ho messo tutta l'intelligenza che tu non puoi attribuirmi perché, logicamente, ci si inganna a giudicare le persone, quando esse hanno una parte di pensieri che celano nel proprio segreto; di esse si vede solo un lato ». Tacque un attimo e Donato ebbe tutto il tempo di riflettere che, in realtà, egli l'aveva sempre valutata all'incirca come ora cercava di descriverla; ma non fece rimostanze, anzi era contento di dimostrare col suo silenzio che lei non si sbagliava. Del resto era incuriosito, ed in parte lo divertiva la gravità con cui la donna parlava.

« Tu pensi che io abbia fatto tutto ciò che ho fatto, in tanti anni; che ti abbia indotto a mettere assieme una vita senza professione, senza avvenire, senza le preoccupazioni e i legami che hanno tutti gli uomini, perché questo mi piaceva e mi pareva giusto? ».

La zia in fondo era capace anche di qualche tortuosità mentale, dovette ammetterlo subito; ma più che questa rapida considerazione Donato dové preoccuparsi della strana piega che prendeva il discorso; a che cosa corrispondeva tutto ciò se lui domandasse di questo genere non se ne era mai posto?

« No! » disse con forza la donna dopo una lunga pausa. « Non coltivo pregiudizi di vita signorile o cose del genere, anche se siamo discretamente ricchi. Se l'ho fatto c'è una ragione ».

« Sono curioso di saperla, zia » rispose Donato con un filo d'incerta ironia.

« La facciamo troppo lunga. Distesamente ne potremo parlare quando vorrai. Tuo padre fu uno sciagurato ». A suo padre Donato non aveva proprio pensato mai, se non molto genericamente; con quella frase si presentava assai vivo.

« Che ne so di mio padre ».

« Sposò mia sorella ed era malato; una di quelle malattie che quando si presentano in quel modo lasciano un segno nei figli. La malattia vergognosa della quale, da morto, fece morire anche tua madre. Ecco ». Donato rimase assai indifferente, aspettava qualche cosa d'altro, non sapeva bene cosa, ma una cosa diversa.

« Forse non hai capito bene, forse non puoi capire bene ».

« Ma sì, ma sì, stai tranquilla, ho trent'anni e posso capire benissimo. Ma tu che vuoi dire con tutto questo? ».

« Tu sei loro figlio ».

« Sì, questo l'ho capito. Ma non mi sembra poi che la cosa debba apparire così tragica, ormai ». Gli era venuta questa frase, ma in verità non sapeva ancora bene se davvero tutto questo non fosse tanto importante quanto appariva alla zia che, ora, non nascondeva l'estrema agitazione che la faceva fremere e la rendeva anche curiosamente battagliera.

« No, non capisci bene. Non capisci che cosa significa, perciò non capisci che cosa sono stati questi trenta anni per me. Non puoi capire che cosa provai quando tu, di soli due anni e mezzo, rimanesti a me sola e perpetuavi tutti gli orrori che io avevo avuto tempo di conoscere in tuo padre e la sua vittima, mia sorella. Da quel po' che sapevo, da quello che dovetti imparare in quei due anni, da quello che volli apprendere poi, compresi che tu, l'unico veramente innocente, avresti portato per sempre il marchio di quelle colpe. Fu per questo che ti sono stata tutta la vita vicina come una sentinella! »

« Una sentinella? »

« Sì, non sorridere. Lascia stare. Ti sto parlando d'un lungo calvario: l'accettai! Adeguai la tua vita al tuo stato. La mia vigilanza su di te non è stata solo di affetto, ma anche di assidua e tacita protezione, di accorto continuo calcolo per indurti ad un tipo di vita, per creare in te stesso la tua protezione. Sì, ho sempre visto quanto era difficile; ho sempre

capito che non avrei fatto di te un uomo felice, un uomo normale. Ma non mi rimaneva altra scelta e, fino ad oggi, ho avuto conferma della saggezza del mio operato ».

« Ma pensi proprio d'essere stata tu a farmi, d'avermi costruito tu? Non pensi che forse la mia vita è in un certo modo perché io ho voluto che fosse così, perché a me piace così? Del resto io non penso affatto di essere infelice; non esageriamo ». La zia si alzò un poco e rimase sollevata dalla sedia con le mani poggiate sul tavolo e disse con forza:

« Se non sai di essere infelice vuol dire che non sai proprio nulla del mondo, che sei un povero diavolo. Del resto non chiacchieriamo inutilmente, un fatto resta: io ti ho fatto! ».

« Oh zia!? ».

« Che intendi; tutta la vita per proteggerti, per separarti dal male che porti in te. Ma tu non puoi capire che cosa può essere il figlio di un... » non ebbe il coraggio di dire la parola.

« Esageri davvero, zia ».

« Avrei esagerato per trenta anni? No! So quello che ho fatto e se oggi rivelo tutto questo, se ti faccio conoscere l'orrore che io ho arginato in te, è perché ormai ora, bene o male, sei un uomo; perché è arrivato, più tardi di quanto non pensassi, il momento in cui ogni mio accorgimento non può servire, serve la realtà, ora. Avevo previsto questo momento e solo in tale occasione avevo deciso di metterti dinanzi alla verità ». La donna si accasciò per un poco. Donato allora desiderò cambiar tono al discorso e, cercando nella memoria qualche vaga cognizione, provò a minimizzare, anche perché in realtà gli pareva che la zia drammatizzasse una storia come ce ne sono tante da per tutto; cominciò:

« Ma oggi queste cose non sono più terribili come una volta; la medicina ha mezzi che a quei tempi erano sconosciuti. Non sono più cose terribili, queste ».

« Non sono terribili? Queste cose sono orrende! ». Ora la zia si era violentemente ripresa; probabilmente, più che accasciata, prima, si era concentrata per pensare. Teneva ancora le mani poggiate sul tavolo ma aveva chiuso i pugni. « Queste sono cose orrende. Tu le devi capire, sei obbligato a capirle ora, proprio ora che tu vaneggi di stupidi matrimoni, di un matrimonio che se anche non fosse stupido è impossibile. Tu

non ne hai colpa, certo, ma gli uomini come te non si sposano ».

In men di mezz'ora Donato aveva avuto più occasioni di tutta la sua vita passata per meravigliarsi della zia. Ora aveva assunto un aspetto battagliero, così deciso da annullare perfino il ridicolo del contrasto tra quel sacchetto d'ossa del suo corpicino e la strana caparbia forza che esprimeva. Quell'aspetto cominciò a fargli intuire che le sue rimostranze di indifferenza dinanzi al segreto drammaticamente svelato, esasperavano in lei qualche cosa che non apparteneva più al dramma stesso, forse anche per lei svuotatosi del suo contenuto durante il passare dei lustri. Forse di tutto era rimasto l'intimo orgoglio d'aver plasmata una creatura, ed insieme la giustificazione della propria esistenza, altrimenti di per sé insignificante. Dubitar queste cose, per Donato, anziché divenire ragione di comprensione, divenne immediatamente ragione di un crudo e subitaneo inasprimento. Contraddire la vecchia era senz'altro un modo di tormentarla; l'avrebbe tormentata; sentì salire alla mente un'onda di risentimento cattivo, amaro, si sarebbe vendicato; ma di che cosa? Era assurdo quello che stava pensando; tuttavia si mise a parlare con falsa pacatezza:

« Povera zia, hai sciupato il meglio della tua vita dietro a me, dietro a fantasmi inutili. Sarebbero state più logiche alcune *wassermann*, qualche altro controllo medico e qualche consiglio a me, parecchi anni fa. Allora avrei capito meglio. Così sei corsa dietro a ombre inutili, ma infine hai riempito la tua vita che altrimenti non ti avrebbe certo riservato gran che, naturalmente ».

« Ecco, ti ho spiato per trenta anni, ho cercato in ogni tuo gesto, in tutto di te il segno della maledetta eredità e mai nulla, mai nulla. Ma il demonio c'era, ora lo sento nelle tue parole, ora lo vedo. È bastato rendertene un poco consapevole, perché tu mostrassi che sei figlio del male, figlio del demonio. Ora hai bisogno di me più che nel passato, ora ti proteggerò da te stesso! »

Dopo queste parole a Donato parve intravedere la giustificazione del suo risentimento, della sua voglia di vendicarsi, di tutto ciò che lo spingeva ad essere crudele, in quel momento, con la « Sentinella ».

« Da che cosa potrai proteggermi, ora? ».

« Da te stesso, dagli errori che verranno dopo il tentativo di fare il primo, quello di sposarti. Dal demonio ti proteggerò ».

Non una sentinella, essa aveva detto bene dopo, una spia acquattata dietro la sua anima, delusa di attendere tanto ciò che desiderava ci fosse. La sua mente ora non reggeva più quella specie di quasi divertita indifferenza che aveva ostentato dinanzi alla zia; un tumulto cominciava a salire nei suoi pensieri, ad attanagliargli lo stomaco; ebbe un po' di paura, dominò il suo stato con uno sforzo, riprese fiato largamente e rispose:

« Tu non proteggerai nulla. Io deciderò per me ». La zia girò attorno al tavolo minacciosa. Ancora una volta sarebbe stata divertente, a guardarla bene e con distacco; ma la aggressività era tale, emanava una forza così palese, che quando si fermò dinanzi a Donato e fissandolo negli occhi disse, dura: « No! », Donato ne fu stranamente toccato a fondo; quel « no » ferì qualche punto recondito del suo cervello e rimase così, senza dire una parola. Nella sua mente qualche cosa era come stesse per rompersi, ma in un cedimento improvviso tutto si risolse con un pensiero semplice e banale, almeno così parve a Donato, che confermò a se stesso: — Sì, un nipote può strangolare la sua vecchia zia. Fatti del genere accadono tutti i giorni e non sono proprio fatti del tutto straordinari —. La zia era rimasta in piedi davanti a lui e lo guardava negli occhi con una decisione che lo paralizzava, si sentì sciogliere in un languore amaro e cattivo e si lasciò cadere seduto sulla sedia. La zia allora respirò profondamente, volse lo sguardo altrove e disse con molta dolcezza mentre si allontanava: « Vai a letto ».

Non dormì; disteso sul letto cercò di fare ordine, anzi cercò di ritrovare un certo equilibrio, di respirare regolarmente, e soltanto quando raggiunse una relativa distensione poté pensare; ma ciò che cominciò a circolare per la sua testa era soltanto una vana fuga di idee. Il fastidio maggiore, che pur vagamente avvertiva, era un discreto risentimento contro se stesso per quella agitazione che riteneva ingiustificata. — Un dramma nella piccola testa di una zitella. Una storia che per la maggior parte non mi riguarda. Le colpe dei padri che sono mai, che significato hanno? — La sua mente cominciò a ga-

loppare con curioso disordine. — Questa storia delle colpe, chi è mai colpevole? Adamo forse. Vittime delle colpe dei padri sono i figli? Responsabili delle colpe dei padri sono gli avi, delle colpe dei poveri i ricchi, delle colpe dei ricchi coloro che tramandarono i privilegi, coloro che tennero schiave le genti. Nessuno è responsabile della propria colpa. Mangiare una mela è stato un peccato... — Si arrestò, si rese conto che la sua mente correva stupidamente in disordine e l'ultima frase gli diede un po' di respiro perché gli sembrò buffa. Ma dopo poco la fuga delle idee riprese repentina. — Ecco la distruzione spirituale, ecco il maledetto struggimento, la paura della vita! La forza di rinascere ogni volta che mi sento morire, ecco, ora forse si può spiegare tutto. Possibile che sia tutto qui? No, sarebbe troppo cretino, troppo semplice sarebbe, troppo brutta la ragione del mio essere. No, la maledizione è essere nati! — Si sentì preso da una ira insensata; una parola sembrò approssimarsi alle sue labbra come una pietra fredda e tagliente, si premé la bocca con le mani e rimase così: se il nome di Dio fosse passato sulle sue labbra come aveva sfiorato la sua mente, ne avrebbe sentito una grande vergogna. Finì per piangere sommessamente.

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La zia di Donato era particolarmente compiaciuta del risultato raggiunto. Il grande sacrificio ed il terribile segreto, per ripetere una sua definizione, l'avevano condotta alla grande prova, ed ora confidava che l'avvenire poteva in gran parte considerarsi risolto. Pensava con sollievo alla riconoscenza che Donato le avrebbe dovuto per sempre, s'immaginava che lui avrebbe capito le stesse cose che lei voleva; ed una gioia discreta e inconfessabile era il risultato di quanto era accaduto. Contava molto sul viaggio a cui giudiziosamente aveva indotto il nipote, quasi come un premio all'accettazione delle sue ragioni.

Donato in quel momento si trovava a Roma: c'era già stato altre volte assai fugacemente, invece ora aveva dinanzi a sé un tempo indeterminato. Pochi immaginano come sono lunghe le giornate di un provinciale nella grande città; comunque lui aveva discreta cultura per apprezzare e scegliere, per

poter godere assai di ciò che offriva la capitale, anche al di là d'ogni stereotipato itinerario turistico. Tutto sommato ci teneva ad essere un provinciale, con tutte le relative reticenze, e non si nascondeva per nulla lo smarrimento che gli dava la grande città. Al mattino si svegliava non privo di qualche entusiasmo per il programma che si era preparato con cura; ma durante la giornata una specie di noia sottile lo vinceva, cominciava a camminare per chilometri e chilometri con un automatismo avvilito, pur rispettando le tappe dei suoi itinerari, e solo a tratti la struggente immagine di un monumento dorato, di una strada, di qualche panorama, apriva un varco nel suo cuore; era qualche cosa di estremamente fugace, ma lui sapeva che vi sarebbe rimasto inciso per l'avvenire, come si conserva ciò che un giorno ci sarà certamente utile o addirittura necessario. Salvo questi squarci ricettivi camminava assente, ed a un certo punto aveva percorso un tal numero di chilometri che il riposo della notte non bastava più e riprendeva la marcia al mattino posseduto da una stanchezza bestiale. Ma proprio in quella stanchezza la sua mente cominciò a snebbarsi, camminando nel semideserto della sua inutile vacanza cominciarono a crescere in lui certe sensazioni rapide che gli aprivano qualche orizzonte assai curioso.

Alla giovane Donadio con precisione ci aveva pensato soltanto durante il viaggio per raggiungere la capitale: accettare l'idea di rinunciare era stato facilissimo per lui, con un processo che, al momento, gli rimaneva un po' oscuro. Il fatto era che il feroce accanimento della zia aveva stranamente agito secondo i di lei intenti. Nel contempo c'era stata anche una certa sofferenza in quella decisione, non per la rinuncia in sé, ma giusto per quanto essa corrispondeva ai voleri della zia: questo pensiero l'aveva fatto soffrire durante il viaggio, si era contorto sul sedile del treno come se vi fosse stato legato. Non l'aveva consolato il cercar di convincersi che la volontà della vecchia non c'entrava per nulla, che aveva ben capito per conto suo l'insufficienza di quel povero essere innocentemente volgare. Ma era proprio così, o la lunga vigilanza della « Sentinella » aveva sortito tutti i suoi effetti? Comunque pensasse, la faccenda gli appariva estremamente odiosa e l'induceva ad un'ira di cui, anche dopo molti giorni, non sapeva bene se si era liberato. Gli sarebbe stato necessario qualche cosa di gen-

tile e di semplice, ma non sapeva dove l'avrebbe trovato, giacché il soggiorno nella capitale per il momento era soltanto stancante.

Chi può mai capire un uomo. Il caso a volte aiuta, ma il caso a cui s'era sempre affidato Donato per lui era stata una ricerca tutt'altro che casuale, anche se mai riusciva a ricostruire il processo attraverso il quale arrivava alle proprie soluzioni. Quello che a lui mancava, lo pensava stando seduto ad un caffè di via Veneto guardando tanto mondo a lui vicino e tanto estraneo, quello che a lui mancava era un confronto: vivere con gli altri per confrontarsi, per capire dove finisce o dove comincia la realtà. Guardava stupefatto la folla quasi sperando di leggersi qualche cosa che lo illuminasse, ma le immagini restavano mute ed ostili, meno quelle di qualche bella donna perché, senza accorgersene, da qualche tempo guardava le donne. -- Tuffarsi negli altri come in un bagno purificatore — ma a questo punto capì che ragionava come un bambino. Queste idee lo sconsigliavano ed allora non c'era altro che rimettersi in moto, sopraffatto dalla stanchezza in cui pareva punirsi gratuitamente, senza un perché.

Infatti perché camminava, che cosa andava cercando, che cosa cerca un uomo che non sa cosa volere? L'abbrutimento della stanchezza rendeva sempre più automatico il suo passo; inconsapevolmente cominciava a prediligere le strade meno frequentate, i vicoli. Che cosa stava mai facendo; possibile che tutto si faccia senza scopo? Stava cercando, tutti gli uomini cercano, anche quelli che sanno che cosa fanno. A notte fatta si trovò intrigato in vicoli assai oscuri, si fermò esausto in una breve strada dove non giungeva alcun rumore del traffico eppur vi si sentiva la vita scorrere densa e sotterranea, si sentiva che si era in mezzo, in un bagno di esseri umani. Si appoggiò ad un muro protetto dall'oscurità: suonarono delle campane, cominciò a venir giù una pioggia leggerissima e qualche goccia che gli scorreva sul viso la lasciò scendere come una lacrima. Il fresco della pioggia attenuò la sua stanchezza e la sua mente fu lucida, anzi, cominciò a percepire chiaramente, perché, cosa pensare, non lo sapeva. Distante, all'angolo opposto, intravide un uomo che diceva tante parole sul viso di una ragazza; erano felici, o almeno ne fu certo Donato. Era bello per lui quel momento, raccoglieva una tenera serenità da ciò che

gli stava attorno: quella strada solitaria, quei muri attempati e anonimi avrebbero avuto poco significato per lui, ma da essi raccoglieva il messaggio di tanta vita anonima trascorsa, di tanta vita che dietro di essi tutt'ora era presente; anche se lui sapeva poco comprenderla era una folla amica e discreta che gli stava vicino. Appoggiò la testa e chiuse gli occhi, rimase fermo, non voleva perdere tutto ciò; possibilmente avrebbe voluto capire. Un nome, una invocazione salì alla sommità dei suoi pensieri, sfiorò le sue labbra e sarebbe esploso imperioso e sconcertante se non ne avesse avuto paura, paura e vergogna. Si contrasse per respingerlo, per non esserne sopraffatto. Nulla di tutto quello che aveva sempre levitato nella sua mente aveva oltrepassato quel limite. Si ritrasse incerto, annaspò col pensiero per riallacciarsi alle cose vive un attino innanzi, ma un'idea odiosa venne ad interferire in quella sua dolente fugace felicità: trent'anni d'amore gli aveva dedicato la zia. Si ribellò, ma l'onda di odio ricadde su di lui; sputò per terra esterrefatto, lui, lindo, bene educato, del gesto inaudito. Rimase ancora in quel luogo per un certo tempo, ma ormai non c'era più che l'umido ed il buio, l'aspetto miserevole e poco pulito delle case; c'era in più il dolore acuto d'aver perduto amaramente e troppo presto quel momento che l'aveva reso felice.

Non gli rimaneva che camminare nuovamente, stancarsi fino all'esaurimento d'ogni forza; qualche strada più avanti trovò un po' di animazione, vi erano due o tre insegne luminose; lesse il nome della strada e lo riconobbe perché era famoso, o malfamato; allora cercò quello che vi avrebbe dovuto trovare, si fermò dinanzi ad uno dei portoncini più chiaramente significativi, dentro si intravedeva una porta a vetri colorati dietro i quali brillava un poco di luce. Rimase lì a guardare ed ebbe l'impressione di pensare ad altro, di divagare confusamente; gli parve di restare ad aspettare, aveva sempre atteso, tutti gli anni della sua vita ad attendere senza mai procedere verso l'uscita del suo labirinto, senza mai fare un passo avanti: ne fece due, tre, quattro, reali sicuri e inconsapevoli, entrò in quel luogo d'una tristezza infinita spalle a spalle con qualcuno; il suo Prossimo. Nei templi era entrato soltanto congedato per mano quando era bambino, con estrema riluttanza, ma fiducioso nella mano che lo conduceva; più tardi dinanzi

ad una chiesa aveva sempre esitato: la gente prega nel silenzio delle chiese, rivela anche a se stessa il proprio segreto, depone le proprie macchie e si costruisce sulle proprie colpe; ma lui si è sempre sentito lindo e infantile. Chi lo conduceva ora? Perché proprio lì, senza preavviso, senza paura? Spinse la porta a vetri, l'onda di viziato profumo femminile che l'avvolse gli diede un attimo di esitazione. Avanzò come un solitario miscredente varca la soglia di un tempio con l'inconfessata speranza d'incontrarvi la fede. Gli parve di cominciare a pregare.

ENRICO TOBIA

A SCAVARE RIMANI...

*A scavare rimani, nel silenzio,
dentro di te, nel vuoto, in quest'atroce
luce bianca che sbatte irrequieta
come un uccello indocile e colpisce
i sofferenti occhi: non sai
se è amor di verità o se è implacabile
odio di te,
luce con cui ti illumini e t'accechi.
Forse nel buio dormono i diamanti,
i guizzi aspri di felicità:
nessuno
li desterà.*

*Rimane
solo questo scavare, solo questo
ricercare nel freddo, con le dita
bianche di marmo, un caldo,
come si cerca tra la secca polvere
dell'arido dicembre l'oro occulto,
il tiepido splendore d'una foglia
ultima dell'autunno, la reliquia
del platano
che i nudi rami allarga nell'azzurro
duro, freddo e cocente dell'inverno.*

DAL PONTE DELL'ARICCIA

*Il sole impallidito dell'ottobre
scende al tramonto. Verdi lame tagliano
rilucenti di cielo
le nuvole di viola. Ricomincia
il lutto della terra.*

*Per te accenditi
un lume tra le mani. Rosea lampada,
portala nel silenzio, nella morte:
una luce cristiana
per te, per il tuo viaggio nell'inverno.*

RENZO ROSSO

UNA LONTANA ESTATE

I

Se le esperienze del passato conservassero permanentemente nella memoria il rilievo che ebbero nel momento del loro accadere, forse la coscienza cederebbe al loro peso, e certamente la villeggiatura dell'estate 1943 avrei dovuto ricordarla ogni ora e giorno della mia vita successiva. Avevo allora diciassette anni e non so più se per premiare me della raggiunta maturità classica o se stesso della ininterrotta cura che si era preso della mia adolescenza e che nello scrutinio finale del liceo aveva appunto toccato il suo compimento, mio padre decise di mandarmi in montagna.

Era la prima settimana d'agosto, lo scirocco opprimeva la città da vari giorni, i miei amici avevano già raggiunto le loro ville di Opcina e di Cortina, e io passavo le giornate o sulle terrazze dell'Excelsior o in giro per i vicoli da poco scoperti di Cittavecchia, annusando gli odori pigri, rancidi e profumati di via del Fortino, via del Sale e via Capitelli; perciò accettai di buon grado l'idea di F., dove io e lui avevamo trascorso due anni prima una bella estate, e fatta la valigia, presi il primo treno per Venezia. Arrivai a F. nel tardo pomeriggio, il sole tramontato dietro le lontane prealpi, ma vivo ancora sulle crode rosa delle cime dello Schiara e del Serva, l'ampia valle, che avevo risalito con la corriera, verdeazzurra sui fianchi e grigia nel fondo, dove si intravedeva il bianco letto del Piave. Al vecchio albergo le rubiconde signore Holzer mi riconobbero subito e mi accolsero con effusioni di generosa cortesia; la mia intenzione di fermarmi una ventina di giorni dovette commuoverle profondamente perché prima ancora di farmi togliere di mano la valigia, mi vollero mettere

al corrente dell'identità e della classe degli altri villeggianti, coll'intenzione scoperta di convincermi che il mio posto ormai era nella cerchia eletta degli *habitués*. I quali poverini, con quel « pasticcio » in giro, le avevano « tradite », tutti, meno « quella cara signora Borghi » che io avevo certamente conosciuto due anni prima.

Sul momento non feci più caso a quel nome che agli altri pronunciati dalle due donne nelle minuziose e caotiche descrizioni di clienti e di assenti, desideroso com'ero che quel dialogo terminasse al più presto in un bagno e in letto; ma quando più tardi, nella camera che mi avevano finalmente assegnata, mi giunse dalla stanza attigua il suono di una voce densa e nervosa che per certo avevo già udito in qualche posto, mi risovvenni di colpo della signora Borghi, e con crescente illuminazione, dei suoi capelli rossi, della sua figura slanciata, della sua straordinaria avvenenza. Eccitato dai ricordi impreveduti e dal desiderio repentino di vederla e di vedermi riconosciuto da lei, dimenticai e il sonno e la stanchezza del lungo viaggio, e vestitomi in fretta, attesi trepidante dietro la mia porta di sentirla uscire. Anche mio padre allora l'aveva ammirata, ma al diletto che la sua vicinanza innegabilmente gli procurava, egli vi mescolava una non so qual sorta di diffidenza; una volta l'aveva chiamata una soddisfacente incarnazione di Cleopatra, « anzi, Cleopatràs », e il mitico nome le era rimasto incollato nella mia mente perché, scartando l'ambiguo significato che mio padre vi aveva sottinteso, esso mi aveva aiutato a definire nell'accogliente indeterminatezza del suo ritratto convenzionale l'impressione di inaccessibile e regale bellezza che quella donna aveva suscitato in me.

Quando, dopo che i rumori nella stanza accanto e nel corridoio mi avevano fatto capire che era uscita, ebbi aperto la porta e guardato la figura che si allontanava nel lungo corridoio, gli ultimi dubbi si sciolsero: era lei, meno alta di come mi era ritornata in mente, meno regale, il vestito aderente al corpo pieno, rotondamente sciolto, e morbidi polpacci sfumati con una modellatura rigorosa sul collo delle caviglie sottili, che parevano sostenere esse sole il peso delle reni ampie, arcuate. Era in compagnia di un bambino di due o tre anni che le rifiutava la mano, per appendersi al suo vestito e alla gamba, sì da incepparla nel passo, con moine appiccicose e piccoli lamenti, l'amore petulante, disperato, breve e testardo dei bambini ricchi, affidati alle governanti, per le loro madri avarie. Mi misi a seguirla tenendomi a distanza, per evitare

l'incontro in quel posto e spostarlo più avanti, in una cornice più adatta e soprattutto concorde con i miei sentimenti che crescevano già lungo l'iperbole dell'avventura, pieni di gonfie e indistinte speranze. Poiché si era fermata con alcune persone al centro del piazzale antistante l'albergo, non visto, raggiunsi con un ampio giro le acacie che si allineavano a delimitare il piazzale dalla parte del parco e che mi nascosero nell'ombra delle loro fronde.

Non ero certamente in grado di godere la seduzione della natura, tanto fissamente seguivo la continua irrequietezza del corpo di lei, che perdeva e ritrovava l'equilibrio ora sui talloni, ora sulle punte, ora sulle gambe divaricate, eppure una parte dei miei sensi dovette registrare il contorno di quell'agguato adolescente, se sento crescere attorno a me e al tronco dell'acacia a cui mi appoggiavo, il trillato e gracidente fruscio del parco, e rivedo il principio di quella sera d'agosto, un'aria azzurra che addensava le tinte attorno alle rispettive matrici, chiare e scure, nell'estremo riverbero del giorno ormai lontano che gli oggetti sembrano emanare, alterati i contorni, un attimo prima di disporsi nella definitiva planimetria notturna. Si accesero i fanali, schermati di nero; la Borghi si staccò dal gruppo e si diresse alla mia volta. Quando fu a pochi passi, le andai incontro e pronunciai il suo nome. I suoi occhi verdi mi fissarono e il mio scoperto turbamento dovette divertirla perché fu quasi ridendo che mi tese la mano e mi diede il benvenuto, e per togliermi dal viso l'aria mortificata che doveva scorgervi, mi chiese notizie di mio padre. A sua volta mi parlò del marito che non vedeva da tre mesi, impegnato con la sua squadriglia nella battaglia del Sud, e poi dei genitori di lui, che si erano messi in viaggio verso il fronte, ma erano tornati indietro, a Firenze, senza averlo visto, e infine del bambino.

« Ti ricordavi di me, dunque? » « Sì, signora », le risposi, ma non seppi aggiungere altro, e l'imbarazzo aumentò la confusione; nella quale purtuttavia capii, ahimé fin troppo lucidamente, che altro avrebbe dovuto essere il mio contegno fin da quel provvido inizio; sentivo me stesso come lei mi vedeva, un ragazzo cresciuto in fretta, goffo e impacciato proprio per voler maneggiare un'idea fuori misura. Mi domandò: « Quanti anni hai? », e in tal modo l'esame poté dirsi concluso. Fu però gentile e non nascose il piacere che le procurava il mio comportamento. Discorremmo della scuola, della mia città, dell'albergo, a lungo, la rabbia contro me stesso inghiottita a poco a poco dalla neutralità degli argomenti, ciò che se non

altro mi consentì di considerarla con minore emozione. Qualunque parte del suo corpo avrebbe potuto destar meraviglia, sì calde erano le sue linee e perfette le proporzioni, senza tuttavia con ciò ottenere il suo merito; perché bisognava ritornare sempre ai suoi occhi, come al centro e al fuoco delle membra, da quelli sostenute e vivificate e rese aperte, cariche di stordenti inclinazioni. Così il suo muoversi, che era lento, senza soste o accelerazioni, ispirato a un disegno composto esclusivamente da costanti segni circolari, — gli avambracci intrecciati sotto il seno che si scioglievano per obbedire alla mano sinistra, alzatasi ad accarezzare il collo, il lobo dell'orecchio, l'orlo della scollatura sul petto, la cintura, il fianco, per ritornare lungo il braccio destro, la guancia, i capelli, il collo, sotto il seno — questo continuo movimento pareva dettato dalla necessità organica di scaricare l'energia che quegli occhi andavano accumulando in se stessi, attraverso le interne supine elaborazioni, e che trapelava nella loro luminosa sostanza verde. Esprimeva anche, con questo, una specie di impazienza, che salti improvvisi nel tono della voce, immotivabili con i piani argomenti della nostra conversazione, rendevano più evidente e non meno inspiegabile (quasi che entro breve tempo dovesse emergere da un punto qualsiasi dello spazio, dalla mia persona o dal folto notturno del bosco sottostante, l'oggetto di una sua inquieta attesa).

Quella sera, dopo aver assistito al pasto del bambino, mi chiamò alla sua tavola, provocando l'approvazione di una delle Holzer, che si avvicinò per congratularsi della nostra ritrovata amicizia.

« Ho piacere, ho piacere che stiate insieme. Questo signorino è un ottimo giovine, e sono sicura che le saprà fare buona e discreta compagnia ».

« Sì — rispose la Borghi, scrutandomi — finalmente un uomo. Saprai ballare, spero ».

« Ecco, ecco ballate, c'è il grammofono di là, ci sono i dischi ».

« Oh non mi faccia arrabbiare lei — disse la Borghi, e non capivo se scherzasse — i suoi dischi! Anna e Una chiesetta Amor, dipinta in mezzo ai fiori! Per fortuna mi sono portata i miei, me l'immaginavo di ritrovarli. Glieli romperò, sa, ci conti ». La Holzer annuiva con materno compiacimento: « Ha ragione, Marcella, ha proprio ragione — disse — li rompa tutti, balli coi suoi, ne comprerò dei nuovi, fate quello che vi passa per la testa, cari, pur che stiate allegri. Vi hanno servito

bene? » chiese, e senza attendere l'immane risposta, che le fornii io solo a mezza voce, si spostò a un altro tavolo.

« Dopo — disse forte e aspra la Borghi — noi due ce ne andiamo di sopra a ballare, soli, in barba a tutti, in una delle camere vuote, ho anche il grammofono ».

Con la coda dell'occhio vidi che i commensali più vicini si erano voltati, ma mentre in cuor mio cominciavo a rallegrarmi nonostante il rossore che mi infiammava la faccia, mi avvidi che in netto contrasto con quanto mi sarei aspettato, le loro espressioni erano improntate a simpatia e curiosità, cosa che se acquistò la mia timidezza, ferì violentemente il mio orgoglio, perché pensai che fosse la mia età a togliere ogni ombra di scandalo a quella frase. Mi sarei accorto più avanti, quella sera e nei giorni successivi, di essermi sbagliato: la guardavano a quel modo, qualunque cosa dicesse o facesse, perché essa rappresentava l'unica cosa viva e imprevedibile della loro annoiata e spaurita comunità. Non per caso il suo tavolo era al centro dello spazio che occupavano, ben stretti gli uni agli altri, nella parte destra del grande salone semivuoto; la sua vitalità misteriosa e genuina irraggiava all'intorno l'estro, il divertimento e il capriccio di cui in quel particolare momento, e sia pure solo come spettatori, avevano un oscuro bisogno. Quando più tardi, in una stanza disabitata di fronte alle nostre ci mettemmo a ballare tra i letti e l'armadio al suono del suo grammofono, non passarono dieci minuti che otto o nove persone, due coppie non più giovani, due ragazzi e tre fanciulle di quindici o sedici anni, entrarono furtivamente e si disposero sui letti e presso la finestra a osservarci con una radiosa, servile compunzione. La Borghi non pareva far caso alla loro presenza, ma ugualmente non mostrava di provarne fastidio. La nostra esibizione solitaria si protrasse per alcuni ballabili, poi per la piccolezza dell'ambiente l'atmosfera si riscaldò e anche quegli ospiti non invitati cominciarono a ballare. Verso la mezzanotte la signora Borghi salutò me e gli altri con un « buonanotte » generale e lasciò la stanza; chiudemmo subito dopo il grammofono e ce ne andammo via tutti, come se uscita lei, fosse scomparso ogni motivo a trattenerci colà.

Anche su questo riflettei lungamente, disteso sul letto, ma fu il capitolo meno importante dei miei ragionamenti notturni, legato come mi sentivo, cuore e sensi, al fantasma di lei che il suo persistente profumo aiutava a ravvi-

vare, e la vicinanza di là del muro comune a fare concreto e quasi tangibile, e che mi cedette al sonno appena verso l'alba, quando ero ormai convinto di essermene innamorato.

II

Mi abituai in breve a trascorrere con lei molte ore, stupito di poterle stare vicino e più ancora di accorgermi che prediligeva tanto la mia compagnia da giungere qualche rara volta a cercarmi. Dovevano essere le circostanze a favorire simile condotta, eppure credo che mi figurassi di esserne un parziale artefice; ho già detto che i clienti dell'albergo erano pochi, e tra questi non ve n'era alcuno che la interessasse, se tolgo una signora della sua età, madre al pari di lei di un bambino di tre anni, con la quale scambiava di tanto in tanto qualche parola sul tema a loro comune. Le distrazioni mancavano del tutto: il cinema al paese era chiuso e gli unici passatempi erano l'ascolto dei bollettini di guerra, i giochi di carte e le funzioni serali nella minuscola cappella in piazza, alle quali assistevano tutti, in eccezione ai costumi cittadini, probabilmente perché guidati dallo stesso istinto che ci riuniva dal mattino alla sera sulle panchine del piazzale o alla rotonda dei pini nel parco o ai tavolini del bar. E come se questi luoghi fossero i confini del mondo o quelli di un lazzaretto, nessuno li valicava preferendo gli estenuanti ozi dell'albergo alle escursioni e perfino alle semplici passeggiate per gli incantevoli dintorni, pur di non interrompere la rassicurante vicinanza con gli altri assediati. Nell'inerzia di questo vegetare collettivo, eravamo noi due soli a distinguerci, resi indipendenti io dall'esaltazione che mi legava alla Borghi e la Borghi da quella forza interna che la faceva essere del tutto insensibile ai richiami gravitazionali del branco. Avremmo dovuto legarci con robusti nodi, almeno di una tenera affettuosità, e invece quando si spegnevano gli attimi nei quali mi illudevo di aver conquistato una posizione eccezionale nella sua mente, dovevo constatare che ci mancava perfino quell'omertà di gusti, di reazione e di stile che avrebbe dovuto svilupparsi tra di noi per l'ambiente che ci circondava. Eppure non posso arrivare alla indifferenza se devo analizzare i sentimenti della Borghi verso di me; durante le interminabili partite a ramino del pomeriggio o quando ballavamo, la sera, nella camera disabi-

tata, spesso io scoprivo nei suoi occhi, di sotto alle lunghe ciglia che ne smorzavano il fuoco, uno sguardo attento, non labile né causale, cioè preciso e curioso, che passava sul mio viso esplorandolo con paziente e calma sfrontatezza.

Una mattina — era l'ottavo giorno della mia permanenza lassù — mi propose di scendere al Piave, a fare il bagno. Il tempo era propizio, l'ampia valle verde inondata da un sole già vigoroso, il cielo percorso da isolati ammassi di nuvole che seguivano il lento carro di altissimi venti invisibili. Il fresco stormire delle foglie di giovani platani che accompagnavano il sentiero tra i campi, in discesa, si mescolava al soffio rumoroso del fiume che ci veniva incontro dal basso. Nei tratti scoscesi mi precipitavo avanti ad aspettare la sua corsa più guardinga e incerta, a braccia aperte. Si scioglieva dall'abbraccio senza asprezza e proseguivamo, in apparenza felici l'uno dell'altra, e attraverso l'altro di quella natura degna di soavi idilli. Portava un vestito azzurro di cotone, scollato sul petto e sulla schiena, un'ampia gonna ariosa. Le feci strada tra i cespugli bassi e intricati della riva, sostenendo i rami perché passasse senza venirne toccata, e arrivammo al Piave. Si tolse le scarpe, io mi imboccai i calzoni e a piedi nudi attraversammo il margine calmo del fiume, dove la rena è scura e l'acqua si riposa in limpide pozze, nelle quali il limo che riveste la pietra sommersa è morbido come velluto e al contatto si scompone in fradicia polvere grigia. Ci fermammo su di una striscia di terra e di sassi, alcuni dei quali di ciclopica mole, che si stendeva al confine della corrente impetuosa. Non un segno di vita all'intorno, la riva opposta segnata da ininterrotti cespugli, i casolari raccolti sulla collina di faccia, i paesi lontani, alle spalle, sparsi sulla larga costa del monte.

« Spogliamoci, dammi il costume » disse, e sciolta la piccola cintura e slacciato un fermaglio sulla schiena, lasciò cadere ai piedi il vestito. Sfilatasi di poi la sottoveste, si accucciò e si levò il resto; ero rimasto in piedi, alle sue spalle, a fissarla incantato. Si girò e mi disse: « Non starmi a guardare, su! », ma senza attendere di vedersi obbedita si rivolse e indossò il costume. Mi allontanai in modo da esser fuori dalla sua vista e spogliatomi, mi distesi supino, il viso sulla tiepida sabbia, aspettando che mi chiamasse. Credo di aver toccato allora il culmine di quel mio amore, perché il piacere che l'immagine della sua nudità mi aveva dato non si era affatto spento, e contrastando con esso fino a mortificarlo,

la mesta sensazione della sua irraggiungibile estraneità si espanse da ogni parte, trovando forme già preparate ad accoglierla, i modelli della rinuncia, che alla luce stordente e triste di quel corpo acquistarono l'impronta di una privazione senza fine e di una eterna impotenza.

Mi chiamò e ritornai accanto a lei; protendeva la punta del piede nella smeraldina corrente. « È freddissima — urlò, ritraendosi — non ho nessuna voglia di gelarmi ». Il fragore di quell'acqua — rotondi cavalli trasparenti superantisi vorticosamente l'un l'altro, l'uno dopo l'altro — aumentava l'impressione di un violenza animale, trattenuta per un miracolo di volumi e di masse entro il suo letto turbinoso. Mi prese la mano e mi riportò al centro della lunga, esile isola bianca; si sedette sulla sabbia, appoggiando la schiena al fianco liscio di un masso, io mi allungai trasversalmente, vicino ai suoi piedi.

« È bello qui, vero? » dissi.

« Tu sai nuotare? » mi chiese.

« Sì, certo, benissimo ».

« Ti sentiresti di attraversarlo? ».

« Credo che non basti saper nuotare, se è troppo forte ».

« Non si vede da qui se è troppo forte? ».

« Se lei me lo ordinasse, lo farei » — dissi più piano. « Perché? », incalzò lei mettendosi a ridere. « Perché ride? » le chiesi. Aveva dei piedi perfetti, piccola la pianta, il profilo tenero e svelto, il collo delicato, le dita affusolate e proporzionate tra loro, le unghie brillanti di un bel carminio intenso; mi alzai sul gomito per spostare il corpo di quel poco che me li facesse toccare.

« Non crede? » insistei.

« Perché mai te lo dovrei chiedere? ».

« Non siete capricciose, voi donne? Se vuole possiamo tentarlo assieme. La porto sulla schiena ». Come nei film africani le dive cacciatrici sopra gli schiavi negri. Aveva chiuso gli occhi, ma la intuivo gonfia di allegrezza, ancora sopite le sotterranee furie della sua indole.

« Se sei alto quanto me! » disse, riaprendo gli occhi.

« Starei sotto per qualche secondo al più, ma non credo che ci siano punti profondi ».

« No, no, matto, restiamo qui, si sta così bene; non vedo le facce dell'albergo, che gioia! ».

« Anch'io sono una faccia dell'albergo, per questo ».

« Quanto sei carino! » disse, e con l'indice della mano

destra mi sfiorò la fronte il naso e il mento. Il sole era alto, e già così caldo che passava attraverso le palpebre chiuse con fosforescenze bianche, molecolari, mobilissime. In mezzo a quei massi abbagliati il calore era una stanza chiusa, che ci difendeva dal frastuono e dal respiro del fiume. Restammo a lungo senza parlare, poi le chiesi a cosa stesse pensando. « A niente ».

« Non è possibile » dissi.

« Come? ». Mi guardava con gli occhi spalancati, sorpresa.

« Proprio così, non è possibile. Se non si pensa proprio a niente o si dorme o si è morti ».

« Sì, è giusto, pensavo qualcosa, ma non ricordo. È curioso davvero, ma non ricordo ».

« Certo non avrà pensato a me ».

« A te? Tu sei qui, vicino ».

« Ha ragione, io però, guardi, penso a lei ».

« È vero? » chiese; e poi: « Sei un curioso ragazzo ».

« Ragazzo » ripetei e girai il viso dall'altra parte. Ero sicuro di essermi portato dietro i suoi occhi; e i suoi occhi dovevano star mettendo in moto la sua fantasia. Fino a quel momento era stata quieta, arrestata dal fruscio ipnotico del Piave, dalla pelle che si dilatava al calore crescente; ma adesso si stava risvegliando, sorniona o ilare o violenta, ne ero sicuro. Chissà cosa avrebbe mai detto, qualcuna delle perentorie imposizioni che scoppiavano improvvisamente a mezzo dei nostri dialoghi nel parco del meriggio inoltrato, « Sta zitto! » oppure « Stiamo in silenzio! », e che mi costringeva a contare e ricontare gli alberi dell'imbrunire, tre pini, due cipressi, nove grossi abeti, incapace di filare una riflessione qualsiasi; o avrebbe assalito l'immagine di qualcuno — la mia questa volta? — o la natura noiosa, piena di formiche e di ragnatele.

« Hai i capelli biondi come mio marito » disse. « Anche gli occhi sono uguali ai suoi, scuri. E appassionati ». Il cuore prese a battermi con veemenza e mi mancava il coraggio di voltarmi. Sembrava un'accusa, quella frase.

« Sei anche tu serio, naturalmente, per quanto tu sia ancora un vitello... Ma guarda, è proprio buffo che debba... Ti piace la guerra? ».

« No » risposi, pronto e debole. Mi ero voltato e la guardavo, ansioso.

« Ecco! se ti richiameranno andrai a fare il tuo dovere? ». Aveva alleggerito il tono. « Non so », risposi.

« Tuo padre non ti ha posto il problema? ».

« Papà commerciava con l'oriente, con Istambul; adesso è fallito, pressapoco. Secondo lui è una cosa piuttosto inutile e ignobile. Ma forse lo farei, sì ». Non lo sapevo, ma che diavolo voleva da me? La guerra, cos'era; la mia guerra in fondo era stata la licenza senza esami, la fine delle pagliacciate della Gil, forse l'esperienza della comunità eccitata degli allarmi; o anche, sì, i feriti della campagna di Grecia, le navi che attraccavano al porto, zeppe di congelati e l'ospedale maggiore trasformato in una macelleria, migliaia di piedi di mani di gambe perché i vestiti erano estivi e le scarpe di cartone autarchico.

« La strada del dovere — proseguì la Borghi — se tu sapessi qual è, cos'è! ».

« Sentiamo » dissi. Il suo viso aveva assunto una espressione dolceamara, tra divertita e acre, e gli occhi miravano lontano, nel segreto della propria esistenza e natura.

« Solo noi donne sappiamo far diventare chiare le cose ». Non mi riusciva di seguirla, eppure arrivavo a percepire di là dalle parole un rodio che minava la loro intonazione e deviava il loro scopo esterno verso zone più oscure e contraddittorie. Per questo, credo, mi venne fatto di chiederle se era felice. A tutta prima la mimica del suo viso sembrò schernire quella mia domanda; mi rispose invece: « No, non lo sono. Ho bisogno di tutto quanto mi manca per esserlo ».

« Lei sa che cosa le manca? »

« Sapere, come si fa? So questo, che è indispensabile vi sia qualcosa che non si è mai prima posseduto ».

« Questo può andar bene anche per me ».

« Va bene per tutti quelli che non hanno paura di vivere; comunque ». Per quelli che osano — pensai con rabbia — che sanno afferrare ciò che è a portata di mano, che non hanno il timore di venire respinti. Strisciai col corpo ancor più verso di lei, di modo che i suoi piedi vennero a trovarsi quasi sotto il mio fianco; li ritrasse un poco, e allora, infilando la mia mano sinistra sotto uno dei suoi talloni, gliene sollevai uno e lo posai sul mio ventre e così feci anche con l'altro.

« Starà più comoda » dissi, con voce che mi tremava nella gola, e subito dopo chiusi gli occhi. Al riparo dai suoi sguardi, e poiché lasciò fare e non disse nulla, mi abbandonai all'incanto di quel seducente contatto; esso rappresentava la realizzazione di un sogno che aveva rapito e estenuato i miei sensi infantili per lunghe stagioni, e la prova fu che sentii invadermi da un piacere tanto intenso che per poco, io credo,

non diedi in ismanie. I piedi dunque erano posati su di me, e ne sentivo il vivido peso, calco bruciante di una prospettiva che saliva lungo bianchissime membra, capaci e degne di opprimermi aprendomi la calda ombra soprastante, soffocante, umida, e molle, per la mia bocca umile e le mie mani. Come la bolla d'aria nell'acqua colorata della livella si precipita da una estremità all'altra, non trovando il riposo della sua gravità, così la goccia d'aria felice, un grido, che le pulsazioni più rapide del cuore avevano fatto nascere mi girava nella gola, e non rinvenendo posto e sfogo, mi fermavano quasi il respiro e trasmettevano l'ansia trepida di questo e la sua vibrante emozione alle labbra e alle tempie. Durare così, mi pareva il maggior bene che mi fosse mai dato di avere, sciolto com'ero dalle ristrettezze della mia goffa opposizione a lei, anche se in realtà la strada che percorrevo in quella stasi inebriante era pur sempre solitaria, e il piacere quindi furtivo, incorporeo al pari, appunto, di un sogno remoto.

Più tardi, la testa ormai esausta per l'immobile languore, ci bagnammo nel fiume, e oltrepassato il mezzogiorno, ci rimettemmo sulla strada dell'albergo.

III

Nel primo pomeriggio il tempo cambiò e un vento opaco e pesante arrivò su dalla valle portandosi appresso un denso campo di nuvole, raccolto in pianura; qualche improvviso mulinello sollevò vortici di polvere e investì scuotendole le chiome delle acacie; tra i villeggianti rimasti nel piazzale udii qualcuno parlare di pioggia; la Borghi era seduta accanto a me su una sdraia, con le braccia incrociate sopra la testa, e sembrava assopita; io fumavo, impigrito dal cibo e dalla lettura del Gazzettino. Attorno alle creste delle montagne si andava formando una lattiginosa coltre di vapor acqueo; alle balzane impennate dell'aria si intercalavano dimentichi silenzi e brani di vita lontana cioè gridi, il cigolio di una ruota di pozzo, un abbaiare scontento di cane. Poi si udì il motore di una automobile che si avvicinava, imboccava la salita del viale principale, effettuava la curva del piazzale: era una « 1500 » con le bombole di metano sul tetto, di color nero, che andò a fermarsi proprio davanti all'ingresso. Il guidatore stette per un bel po' con le mani sul volante ad osservare pacatamente il piazzale, noi, il parco, e avvicinando il viso al parabrezza

la facciata dell'albergo; poi scese con studiata pigrizia. Era un uomo sui trentacinque anni, bruno, piuttosto alto e magro, vestito con cura; aveva una testa leggermente stretta e serrata su un collo robusto, e piccoli incavati occhi celesti sotto sopracciglia spesse che accentuavano l'ombra grigia delle orbite: un viso liscio, privo di rughe come quello di un ragazzo ma che tuttavia possedeva una contrastante espressione di maturità elaborata e astuta. La sua disinvoltura nel silenzio generale fu straordinaria: compì due movimenti per sgranchirsi le gambe, sbatté sulle scarpe bianche che aveva appoggiate al paraurti un panno scamosciato che poi ripose con noncuranza nella tasca della portiera, sfiorò con la mano destra aperta i capelli leggermente ondulati, schiaffeggiò i pantaloni grigio-chiari e le maniche della camicia per togliervi la polvere, e, a lenti passi, squadrando le insegne nobiliari che adornavano sull'architrave di marmo il nome Holzer, entrò nell'albergo. Uno stranissimo tipo — dovemmo pensare tutti — italiano sicuramente, nonostante l'eleganza inconsueta per quei tempi, dato che una certa improntitudine trasparsa nelle movenze arroganti — una familiarità boriosa e superficiale, anche — lo rivelavano tale, e non della migliore estrazione; strano e antipatico, in fondo. Le palpebre della signora Borghi non erano chiuse del tutto, e dal chiarore del resto rispetto all'iride, mi avvenne di sospettare che i suoi occhi fossero puntati nella direzione della porta centrale. Poco dopo lo sconosciuto ricomparve e mentre la cameriera delle stanze che lo seguiva, prendeva dalla macchina una valigia, egli si diresse alla nostra volta e si sedette su una sedia di fronte a me, che stoltamente ero rimasto a seguire il suo tragitto. « Ci si diverte qui, vedo » disse; in un primo momento, sorpreso da quella frase che non mi aspettavo, distolsi il viso, ma dovetti rivolgerglielo non appena cominciò a pronunciare la seconda, per la sua intonazione vagamente interrogativa. « È un bel posto, però. Non so nemmeno come si chiami »; aveva una voce scialba, priva di sfumature, esile di volume, come se avesse inteso riservare a quel monologo introduttivo la parte più irrisoria della sua energia. Gli dissi il nome del paese e sembrò non tenerne alcun conto: esaminava la Borghi dalla testa ai piedi, e allorquando si soffermò sulle sue nude ascelle, la donna, che teneva gli occhi chiusi, abbassò le braccia.

« Infatti — disse l'uomo — non si può dormire con le braccia alzate ». E quindi, rivolto a me:

« Ehi, è aperto il bar? Cosa si trova? Caffè ne hanno? »

« Fanno una buona miscela, con un dito di rhum è passabile ».

« Mi fai compagnia? »

Non aspettò risposta e se ne andò. La signora Borghi decise di trasferirsi nel parco e naturalmente la seguì. Ci sistemammo nelle poltrone di vimini alla rotonda dei cipressi, lei trasse dalla borsa un gomitollo di lana e si mise a lavorare a maglia. Ricordo molti particolari di quel pomeriggio, come si vede, e questo per la ragione che lo sconosciuto aveva mosso i miei istinti contro lui, la donna e me stesso, e testimoniando essi una cosa che mi repugnava, ossia l'attestato della sua personalità, impiegavo la mia volontà a reprimerli, col solo risultato di assorbire i diversi e minuti aspetti della natura che mi era d'intorno e che faceva loro da sfondo, con una involontaria, travagliata attenzione. La luce cruda sotto gli alberi, per esempio, che dal cielo coperto e afoso passando attraverso il verde carico dei pini e dei cipressi trasmetteva alla carne di lei il suo teso pallore, e le cortecce con le bocche colme di resina, pustole laccate di quella loro pelle squamosa e intarsiata, o la ghiaia dei sentieri che obbligava a pensare alla disposizione artificiale di quella flora superba, e introduceva nell'immagine la palizzata del suo confine con la strada e i campi, segnale di una incombente prigione, da cui non mi poteva venire altro sentimento che quello insopportabile di una accoglienza truccata, e cioè di una sconfitta, e della realtà.

Dopo una decina di minuti, durante i quali non c'eravamo scambiati una sola parola, — lei intenta a sferruzzare, e non l'avevo mai vista tanto laboriosa, io a prepararmi da solo la trappola dell'astio e del silenzio orgoglioso — il rumore dei suoi passi sulla ghiaia ci avvertì che lo sconosciuto ci aveva raggiunto.

« Un bel lavoro; da maestra — disse — non la facevo capace di tanto ».

La Borghi alzò il viso, che pregai fosse furibondo e altero; sorridendo gli rispose:

« Dice? E perché mai? »

« Signora, lei è degna di più alti mestieri ».

« Faccio discretamente anche questo ».

« Non ne dubito, anche se si vede che lo fa raramente. Capisco che contro la noia, anche questo è un rimedio. Però... vederla a qualche strumento, non so, il violino, l'arpa... ».

« Suono appena il pianoforte, e piuttosto male ».

« Eppure io scommetto che lei sa fare meravigliosamente tutto ciò che vuole ».

« Crede? »

« In maniera divina. Con quelle mani! »

« Cosa avrebbero le mie mani? »

Qui lo sconosciuto mutò il tono sornione e ironico che aveva tenuto sino a questo momento, e il sottofondo galante affiorò alla superficie addobbandosi di una serietà compunta.

« Ecco — disse — io penso che siano capaci di sentire ciò che le attira, prima del cervello; anzi, dei sensi ».

La Borghi si rituffò nel lavoro a maglia, e mentre l'uomo fattosi più avanti si sedeva di fronte a lei, gli disse:

« Sarebbe anche ora che lei si presentasse ».

Lo sconosciuto balzò in piedi e inclinando il busto rigidamente, in una posizione che forse voleva parodiare una etichetta militaresca, scandì il suo nome, Attilio Rangoni, il suo luogo di nascita, Padova, dove malauguratamente viveva ancora, la sua età, trentatré anni. Quanto alla professione, la sfidava a indovinarla.

« Non sarà forse in congedo? » disse la Borghi.

« Illimitato. Soffro di un male impensabile e costoso » le rispose, godendosi il suo stupore. Continuò: « Per averlo fino alla fine della guerra, ho dovuto sborsare un mucchio di quattrini ».

« È la paura, per caso? » gli chiesi. L'uomo mi squadrò, un fastidio sprezzante mal coperto da una espressione di sorpreso e cortese risentimento.

« Lei è uno sventato -- gli disse la Borghi -- ma non si rende conto che io e Gabriele potremmo denunciarla per quello che ha detto? »

Dovevo della riconoscenza alla Borghi, di avermi nominato accanto a sé?

« Vedete dunque — riprese il Rangoni — che non ho paura di certi rischi. A dire il vero la guerra non è il mio forte; se mi sarà possibile, preferisco scegliere io il luogo e l'individuo che mi debba macellare. Però un contributo lo sto dando anch'io, alla guerra: sono fornitore dei tedeschi, viveri, rottami, di tutto un po' ».

« Commerciante dunque. Non la facevo » disse la Borghi.

« Lei mi lusinga, signora ».

« O molto più semplicemente è un borsaro nero? » gli chiese.

« Ma il vero commercio è la borsa nera. Che cosa non lo

è? I generi della tessera! una schifezza che rappresenta forse il trenta per cento di tutte le operazioni attuali di scambio ».

« Ma perché proprio con i tedeschi? — domandò la Borghi — è una questione di preferenza, di affinità? »

« Di quantità, signora, di quantità e di qualità, non vanno tanto per il sottile e pagano abbastanza presto. Sono corretti, seri e ricchi. Una gran razza! »

« Lo dice per paragone? »

« Per forza; ma siamo migliori noi, dopotutto; i nostri difetti valgono più delle loro qualità. Lei ha il marito sotto le armi, vero? »

« Sì, lo sapeva? »

« Bah, intuito. Ho una certa esperienza, anche ».

« Delle mogli degli uomini che sono al fronte? » chiesi. Senza girare il viso dalla mia parte, rispose all'incirca in questo modo:

« Chiunque non sia proprio un imbecille, ce l'ha: una nobile malinconia, i segni di sacrifici interiori sono evidenti, più o meno in tutte queste vere eroine della lotta ». Il suo tono era così scopertamente falso che non una delle banalità che gli erano uscite di bocca pareva pretendere di venire creduta per se stessa. Ma non tanto questo mi offendeva quanto la sensazione che, pur cosciente di ciò, la Borghi andasse via via accettando di quel contrappunto canagliesco la sordida seconda voce che le parole del Rangoni rivelavano nel loro ordito. Era una sensazione di complicità, assurda e tormentosa perché più guardavo quell'uomo e più mi convincevo di avere di fronte l'essere peggiore che avessi mai incontrato. Purtroppo la sua stessa scaltrezza, che ostentava impudentemente come chi non conosca misura che non sia data dal proprio laido egoismo, mi rendeva a tal punto inerme da non desiderare più nemmeno di arrestare l'andamento che aveva preso il loro dialogo.

« È da molto che non lo vede? »

A questa domanda, che si riferiva al marito, la donna scoppiò in un irrefrenabile scroscio di risa; quando si fu calmata, disse:

« Lei ha una curiosità insidiosa, non le pare di esagerare? »

« A seconda di come la prende — rispose il Rangoni — poteva anche passare per innocente, cordiale tutt'al più, eh! Non me lo vuol dire? »

« Ma sì, ma sì, quattro mesi » disse la Borghi, fissandolo in tralice.

« Eccola qua la guerra: mette le creature in difficoltà, le lontananze dolorose, le notti colme di voglie e si finisce magari condannati dalla morale comune. Per fortuna abbiamo la natura a difendere, a spiegare a giustificare, a fare tutto più semplice, meno complicato, più schietto, no? Un mio vecchio professore scapolo e vergine diceva che chi si affida ad essa è sempre dalla parte della ragione ».

Ristette un momento per accompagnare con un mezzo sorriso, quello spuntato sulla bocca della Borghi; poi concluse:

« Dobbiamo obbedirle qualunque cosa ci ordina ».

« Lei è un predicatore; lo è sempre o solo in circostanze speciali? » disse la donna. « In circostante speciali, so essere anche un poeta — rispose il Rangoni — e le confesso che sono rare perché ho la disgrazia di avere gusti difficili ».

« Commerciante di gusti difficili, questo è raro. Lo sa che lei mi fa ridere? »

« La normalità mi annoia, il bel corpo, la bella bocca e nient'altro, per esempio, non mi dicono niente. Però davanti all'eccezione, a quel grano di pazzia che talvolta si coglie di colpo dietro un viso e che tradisce sensi straordinari, anormali insomma, arrivo a diventare un uomo completamente diverso ».

« E che cosa fa quando le succede una cosa di questo genere? ». L'uomo afferrò il tono canzonatorio della Borghi, strinse gli occhi come per vedere più a fondo in chi aveva di fronte o per dimostrare con l'acutezza che in tal maniera essi volevano scioccamente significare la serietà di ciò che stava per dire, e rispose:

« Punto la mia intera vita. Del resto — proseguì, riprendendo subito il modo di fare ambiguo e allusivo tenuto fino a poco prima — non occorre ciò, perché quando io scorgo quella pazzia vuol dire che anche la donna l'ha scoperta in me. Vuol dire che ci stiamo già eccitando a vicenda. Il resto quindi deve accadere per necessità. Non ci si può sottrarre ».

Il disgusto che provai per quelle luride frasi dozzinali mi soprafecce; escluso com'ero e non solo incapace di intervenire nella conversazione, ma altresì convinto di essere diventato un intruso, trovai una scusa e me ne tornai in albergo. Quando poco prima del pranzo incontrai la Borghi sulle scale e le parlai del Rangoni, mi interruppe mettendomi una mano sulla bocca; mi disse:

« Basta, basta, suavia, sei troppo severo per la tua età Gabriele. Non sono completamente d'accordo con te, sei in-

giusto. Parlagli da solo, lo troverai meno antipatico, te l'assicuro. E poi mi diverte moltissimo; si compiace di fare il buffone, per mettere allegria, non è una buona qualità questa? »

Salì alcuni scalini, si fermò, si voltò e tenendo la testa leggermente piegata, una espressione di graziosa malizia sul bellissimo volto, mi disse ancora:

« Non sarà invece che sei geloso? » e sparì sorridendo nel corridoio; era piena di allegria. Mi feci servire in un tavolo a parte, distante dal suo, e mi sedetti in modo da non vederla se non l'avessi voluto; fu un gesto inutile perché essa né me ne rimproverò allora, né me lo rilevò mai. Mangiai poco o nulla: le emozioni che quella giornata aveva arrecato alla mia inerme sensibilità erano state — così mi pareva — incancellabili. Eppure esse non costituivano che il prologo a lesioni ben più profonde, la vera esperienza sconvolgente, che avrei potuto risparmiarmi ai miei nervi solo che avessi avuto la forza e la maturità di respingere l'attrazione del suo presentimento. Prigioniero perciò della repulsione e assieme della speranza che per desiate cose alimentiamo perfino contro i saggi istinti, accettai dopo pranzo l'invito della signora Borghi di salire nella camera dei nostri composti balli notturni. Oltre ai soliti ragazzi essa aveva naturalmente chiamato anche il Rangoni. Per quanto il cielo si fosse interamente coperto fin dal tramonto, il caldo non aveva ricevuto che un debole sollievo dall'umidità e dal buio della notte; qualcuno aveva portato delle bottiglie di grappa e il sudore, la pigrizia dello scirocco e l'elettricità di quell'atmosfera gravida di incerti equilibri, fecero sì che ne bevemmo abbondantemente. In breve tempo le conversazioni si spensero e tutti si misero a ballare; in ogni coppia si accesero languide e accanite parvenze d'amore che duravano lo spazio di un disco. Ragazzi e ragazze, convinti del ruolo che immaginavano assegnato al proprio sesso dalla situazione, si sforzavano di recitarlo con quell'eccesso di esibizione che nell'adolescenza maschera la timidezza e l'incerta grandiosità dei propositi.

Mi sono soffermato su questi particolari per cercare di spiegarmi come poté succedere che in mezzo a tanta ingenuità, vale a dire dentro la stessa stanza a contatto di noi tutti, prendesse forma la lievitazione di qualcosa di enormemente diverso, ossia di impuro e di sudicio. Forse nella serietà e confusione dei sensi inesperti covava una inconsapevole omertà, fatto è che nessuno si rendeva conto di quanto stava accadendo tra la Borghi e il Rangoni. Non staccandosi neppure nei pochi

istanti di intervallo tra un brano e l'altro stavano visibilmente consumando un reciproco rapimento; in una mistura di arrendevole scoperta dei propri interni consensi e di indagine delle di lui voglie, gli occhi arrossati della Borghi erano medianicamente sbarrati sul suo viso, mentre le mani anziché servirle di appoggio nella danza, che del resto era ridotta a una fittizia flessione altalenante, si spostavano lente dalla nuca — all'attaccatura dei capelli — alla cintola, come per cercare o suscitare al tatto qualche segnale misterioso. Lui, colla testa piegata verso quella di lei, e con le braccia che la serravano ai fianchi, sembrava un uccello feroce che, ghermita una tenera preda, la incantasse con malefici per meglio suggerne, attraverso l'orrenda concordia ipnotica, l'ormai preparata linfa vitale. Non m'era mai avvenuto di assistere a una metamorfosi di tal genere e pur fingendo attenzione alle espansioni della mia giovane partner, la seguivo con crescente ansietà. Essa avrebbe dovuto mortificare fino alle lacrime i miei sentimenti per la signora Borghi, pure credo che questo aspetto personale non avesse alcun rilievo in quei momenti, tanto allucinatorio era ormai il prevedimento della sua mostruosa conclusione. Ad un tratto la ragazza con la quale ballavo e che se ben ricordo era una delle nipoti delle Holzer, mentre passavamo vicini alla porta, allungò un braccio e spense la luce; nel bisbiglio che sopravvenne in quella oscurità completa, udimmo la voce della Borghi, inerte e fievole, dire: « Noi ce ne andiamo, buonanotte ». Subito dopo me la sentii vicina e allora, sporgendo il viso sino a sfiorarle i capelli le sussurrai: « Non se ne vada, resti qui, la prego »; invano. La vidi per un attimo nel vano della porta aperta, contro la luce del corridoio, seguita dalla sagoma dell'uomo, di Rangoni. La ragazza fu lesta a richiudere la porta dietro di loro. « Che te ne importa, andranno a baciarsi in un posto più tranquillo » mi disse, e stupefatta forse della mia indifferenza alle sue moine, incerta quindi dei suoi meriti, al finire di quel disco si sciolse da me con stizza. Ne approfittai e scivolai fuori della stanza; un embrionale ragionamento sulla opportunità delle diverse direzioni o la traccia lasciata dall'odore e dal profumo di lei, mi guidarono al ballatoio esterno di servizio sul retro dell'albergo, che dava nell'aia della masseria e che una ripida scala di legno collegava al pianoterra. Indeciso se proseguire e frastornato, stupefatto di quell'inseguimento, rimasi colà in preda a sentimenti contraddittorii di angoscia e di livore per l'enorme silenzio notturno che nascondendo già in qualche

sua parte i due fuggitivi, permetteva loro chissà quali vergognose carezze. Gli scoscesi boschi e più su l'erto fianco della montagna e la verticale parete della sua croda, emersero in tutta la loro selvaggia composizione; perché nel cielo che si andava proprio allora sgombrando dalle nubi, si diffondeva, ormai libera e sostenuta dalle stelle, la luminosità nascosta fino a poco prima nella sottostante, chiusa atmosfera. Era comunque un chiarore inconsueto, non limpido, non leggero e neppure stabile; e se mai io ne avessi visto di poco allegri o di melanconici e questo doveva esser accaduto nella mia infanzia in mezzo alle pietre lunari di Rifembergo o di S. Daniele del Carso, quello mi parve il più triste, la più triste luce che potesse esserci tra cose di natura. Da una parte vi erano gli attoniti campi che spingevano le zolle ricoperte di stoppie sino al limite nero del bosco; dall'altra, dietro la casa colonica, si addensavano i tetti rossoneri delle case del paese, il muro grigio di qualche solaio più alto, il minuscolo campanile. In mezzo l'aia, e un bianco sentiero che da questa si partiva e diritto si perdeva nel campo, sotto tralci aerei di vite; un vomero era appoggiato al muro esterno della stalla e aveva di fronte la fontana e il lungo abbeveratoio per le bestie.

Qui erano, la Borghi e il Rangoni; scopertili mi si fermò il respiro. Istintivamente mi abbassai e mi misi a spiargli tra i legni traforati della balaustra, tremando di paura, di curiosità e di sdegno. Ebbi chissà come il tempo di riflettere sulla illogica mancanza di precauzione nella scelta del loro luogo d'amore; non capivo che cosa li avesse spinti a fermarsi a venti metri dall'albergo, allo scoperto, rischiando di venire colti in flagrante da un cliente insonne o da un contadino o da chiunque altro. La Borghi era scivolata in ginocchio e doveva appoggiare la testa sul ventre dell'uomo, che era rimasto in piedi. Mi parve di vedere i suoi capelli ondeggiare, come se qualcosa le muovesse la testa, poi il Rangoni si chinò e la rialzò lentamente. La donna sembrava volersi sciogliere da quell'abbraccio e tanto si divincolò che infine, pur rimanendo incollata al corpo di lui, si trovò a voltargli le spalle. Quali abissi mi si apersero sotto il cuore, allorché proteso in avanti il busto e reggendosi con le mani sul bordo dell'abbeveratoio, si lasciò prendere dall'uomo, come una bestia. Avrei avuto la forza di schiacciarle il capo, che continuava a dimenare assecondando i moti delle anche: ero folgorato, e poiché il sudicio piacere si riverberava nei miei sensi e li contagiava di nausea, ebbi un insulto di vomito e scappai. Corsi via da quel-

l'ignobile osservatorio a chiudermi in camera dove e le emozioni patite e l'alcool ingurgitato mi abbandonarono presto a un benefico sonno, nel quale durai lunghe ore.

IV

L'indomani, fattami ragione di quanto era avvenuto, e nonostante una certa avversione mentale per il suo corpo, avvicinai la Borghi e la frequentai come se nulla fosse successo. Mi aspettavo di scoprirle addosso i segni del suo disordine, quasi fiducioso che tanto peccato lasciasse una impronta visibile: era più bella che mai; gli occhi felici, scomparsi i loro aloni bruni che mi avevano fatto pensare talvolta a pianti nascosti, a qualche affaticato dolore, la pelle luminosa e bianca, uno stato gioioso del carattere, più vivace, più schietto, una stupefacente calma solare. Mi trattò con benevolenza e portato che ebbe il discorso sul Rangoni, probabilmente per dissipare qualche dubbia impressione della sera prima, mi dette ad intendere di condividere in buona parte la mia opinione su di lui. In sua presenza si comportò con ostentata freddezza ed egli, esperto delle rituali simulazioni, la ricambiò di un analogo atteggiamento.

Il tempo non si era ancora risolto; nuvole basse percorrevano il cielo, lasciando intravedere ad altissima quota immobili cirri, che parevano attendere lo scioglimento del gioco inferiore. Il quadro, con la eccezione di qualche breve caduta di pioggia e di ancor più brevi schiarite restò immutato per vari giorni; li trascorremmo per lo più nelle sale del bar, dove come ho già detto giocavamo interminabili partite di ramino e di poker, discutendo senza fine sulle notizie diramate dalla radio. La sera ci si ritrovava a ballare nella camera disabitata del primo piano; adattandomi alle circostanze corteggiai la nipote delle Holzer di cui, a tanti anni di distanza, non rammento che il taglio acuto dei suoi occhi bruni. Era un vivere singolare: rifuggivamo dalla natura come se la sua identità geologica con l'altra, pur ancora tanto lontana, nella quale si svolgeva il cataclisma, la rendesse insicura o addirittura pericolosa; la si guardava dalla ringhiera del piazzale — un mosaico di toni verdi, gialli e marron — come malati alle finestre di un ospedale. L'inerzia ci disfaceva a tal punto che se gli avvenimenti esterni si fossero fermati avremmo potuto persistere nel limbo di quegli ozi, interminabili stagioni. Un po'

per l'avvilimento di questa accidia e anche per le intermittenti sofferenze che mi infliggevo ricorrendo all'immagine degli ardenti affanni della Borghi, decisi di strapparmi da quello stato e in tal senso scrissi a mio padre; egli mi rispose prontamente che mi avrebbe rivisto con piacere ma in quei momenti preferiva sapermi in un posto tranquillo ed eccentrico qual era F., e quindi mi consigliava di pazientare qui qualche settimana ancora. Era di quattro giorni prima la notizia dello sbarco angloamericano a Reggio Calabria.

Ricevetti la risposta il 6 settembre: era un giorno ventoso e sereno, uscito da una notte di pioggia, che portò assieme all'espresso di mio padre molta posta per tutti. Vidi la signora Borghi venirsene fuori dalla calca dei villeggianti che attendevano vicino alla porta delle Holzer la distribuzione, e allontanarsi verso l'estremità opposta del piazzale rigirando tra le mani una busta arancione; pochi minuti dopo, con passo frettoloso rientrò nell'albergo. Trascorsero delle ore e al gong della colazione una delle Holzer passandomi accanto mi sussurrò che il pomeriggio sarebbe arrivato il marito della Borghi; alzai lo sguardo alle finestre della sua stanza che erano socchiuse: sapevo che non lo aspettava, perché nell'ultima lettera che aveva ricevuto appena due giorni prima le aveva scritto della squadriglia ricostituita con la quale aveva preso base in un campo vicino Napoli. Non potei appagare subito la curiosità che mi divorava perché in sala da pranzo, dove l'aspettai fin quando l'ultimo cliente non se ne fu andato, seppi da una cameriera che si era fatta portare la colazione di sopra. Per calmare l'agitazione che mi aveva preso mi risolsi a passare le ore dell'attesa lontano dall'albergo e mi diressi perciò fuori del paese, prima verso il chiostro dei certosini poi giù fino al torrente, senza mai sostare; con gli occhi fermati sui sassi e sulla terra battuta che calpestavo. Tremavo, il pensiero fisso a lei, calamitato e respinto ad un tempo dalle anticipazioni mentali che in folla mi rappresentavano l'imminente incontro, nelle infinite variazioni del possibile.

Tornai all'albergo pochi minuti prima delle cinque e mi sedetti su una delle panchine del piazzale, proprio di faccia alle sue finestre. Quando la vecchia corriera a carbonella, con grande fracasso e facendosi raggiungere dalla nube di polvere sollevata negli ultimi metri della sua corsa, si fu fermata davanti alla porta della direzione, la Borghi aperse di scatto uno degli scuri, tenendosi con la mano destra aggrappata alla maniglia dell'altro, pallida in volto, la bocca chiusa quasi senza traccia di rossetto, gli occhi dilatati come in procinto di acco-

gliere una visione soprannaturale, immobili sulla portiera dell'autobus dalla quale erano usciti l'autista e due contadini. « Eccolo là » sentii mormorare dietro a me e voltatomi un solo istante ebbi il tempo di ritrarre il viso del Rangoni, atteggiato nella stessa sospesa curiosità degli altri villeggianti.. L'ufficiale in divisa, messo piede a terra, rivolse lo sguardo in alto, alla finestra dove stava la moglie; questa emise un gemito come di persona cui i sensi stessero cedendo e si ritrasse di slancio, sparendo alla vista. L'ufficiale si curvò ad accarezzare fuggevolmente il bambino che la governante gli aveva portato a salutare, e traendolo dietro a sé per la mano, si avvicinò alla porta centrale. La Borghi si arrestò un attimo sulla soglia; poi gli corse incontro con la foga e i movimenti esausti di un atleta all'estremo delle energie e della gara, e raggiuntolo, lo abbracciò convulsamente, la testa frenetica sul petto di lui come a sentirgli i battiti del cuore. Il marito le alzò il viso e la baciò castamente, e tenendo sempre per mano il figlioletto che aveva approfittato della sosta per tirare calci alla ghiaia del piazzale, trascinò la donna, che, sfatta dalla gioia adorante, si faceva sorreggere dal suo braccio, dentro l'albergo. Oh, quanti particolari ancora oggi sarei capace di ridire di quella scena perché ogni angolo, ombra, contrasto suoi era penetrato dalla mia emozione ed essa ha fatto sì che nulla andasse perduto. Essa era di un tessuto straordinario, dominata da un sentimento molto simile all'orrore e questo, incredibile a dirsi, mi nasceva dalla bellezza; perché lui, l'ufficiale, il marito, era l'uomo più bello che avessi mai veduto. Gli anni e più l'amaro sapore della vicenda potrebbero far dubitare me ancor prima dei miei lettori sulla consistenza di questo aspetto, se in soccorso alla mia memoria non mi giungessero le voci delle persone che lo conobbero, concordi nell'ammirazione della sua virilità, della forza e serietà e fierezza della sua persona. Il corpo robusto e slanciato emanava dalla forma e dai movimenti la pacata sicurezza di fibre educate al coraggio e al controllo, a una ferma autocoscienza fisica. Il viso era un insieme di linee sobrie, la mascella, il mento, la bocca, il naso e la fronte tracciati da un disegno privo di sfumature e incertezze; aveva occhi scuri, tra il blu e il nero, di una vernice profonda, tenaci nell'intensità e aperti nell'espressione. Quanto all'intelligenza ne aveva in misura molto maggiore di quanto ne tollerasse la sua divisa di militare effettivo, e, debbo aggiungere, di una qualità molto vicina al suo aspetto, cioè positiva e chiara, senza contaminazioni di cultura di classe o di mestiere.

Naturalmente tutto ciò potei conoscere nei giorni della nostra breve amicizia, ma questa conoscenza si sviluppò senza sorprese, come la dimostrazione di una tesi che avevo intravista in quella prima apparizione del suo arrivo.

Inchiodato sulla panchina, sentii che la gente d'intorno riprendeva l'usato chiacchierio e i fanciulli i loro giochi interrotti; mi volsi alla mia sinistra e vidi il Rangoni, i piccoli occhi imbambolati, la bocca semiaperta, guardare ancora l'ingresso. Come parlando a se stesso, pronunciò le parole che avrei detto io se ne avessi sentito la necessità, e ne sono sicuro — a suo merito — con la stessa intenzione mentale:

« Ma santo Dio, è incredibile! Ma guarda là! ». Poi mi restituì l'occhiata e mi disse:

« Ha visto, quello? Ho un amico in marina, anche lui decorato, Vanzelli, lo conosce mica?, di Padova, no vero?, abbiamo fatto scuola assieme, era una tigre, che diavolo! e atleta poi, coi fiocchi ».

Ma il pensiero che lo dominava ancora, gli riafferò la lingua e rivolgendosi all'ingresso, su cui si stagliava la Holzer anziana, compiaciuta forse del recente spettacolo offerto ai suoi villeggianti, mormorò: « Ma porco D...! » e poiché, essendo poi scoppiato a ridere, io gli avevo detto qualcosa come: « Non si vergogna? », alzatosi e stiratosi pigramente, mi rispose:

« Che ti piglia, ragazzo? Se hai occhi, ma dubito, io ho fatto soltanto il mio porco dovere ». Un'ora più tardi, presa la macchina dal garage e sistemate le valigie, se ne partì senza salutare né esser salutato da nessuno.

Dopo pranzo la Borghi mi presentò al marito: « È un tuo ammiratore — soggiunse — ed è espertissimo di aerei ». « Proprio di aerei o di fotografie di aerei? » mi chiese sorridendo. Parlammo della nostra aviazione e di quella avversaria, ma ben presto mi accorsi che l'argomento gli dispiaceva e perciò lo lasciai cadere. Eravamo a un tavolino del bar e al centro di un pellegrinaggio di persone che venivano a presentarsi al maggiore, per il piacere di rendere personale la commozione collettiva così già ben soddisfatta nel pomeriggio. La mia era tuttora desta, ma per motivi diversi e soprattutto per il comportamento della moglie. I suoi occhi per l'innanzi vivi, di una vivacità ironica e insofferente, fattisi più chiari e grandi, per dare la felicità perfetta della circostanza si erano inteneriti nel segno di una totale sottomissione, e opachi in ogni altro momento, si accendevano di una mansueta esultanza ogni qualvolta, ricam-

biati o meno, miravano il volto del marito. Indovinavo la carne in armonia con quell'espressione, devota e dolce, morbida, aspettante e ubbidiente, vaso di spirituale passione e di tenere concrete affinità. Di tanto in tanto gli rivolgeva domande sulla guerra, su colleghi che evidentemente conosceva ed egli rispondeva pacatamente, preciso e impersonale sì da dare l'impressione che a quegli avvenimenti — la ritirata di Tunisia, la battaglia di Sicilia, i traslochi per i campi dell'isola — avesse partecipato solo il suo cervello, un cervello di cronista e di storico. Si accalorò su di una sola narrazione.

« L'affare più penoso — disse — è stato la scorta ai convogli sullo stretto. Giù ci mandavano tre Mas, attorno a quattro, cinque navi molto spesso cariche di soldati; di sopra io e un altro, Fortunati di solito, su due Macchi. Eravamo la scorta ». Si fermò; cambiò posizione sulla sedia e girò gli occhi sul soffitto, come se avesse detto tutto; la moglie gli chiese: « E allora? » Riprese il racconto a fatica:

« Ho fatto una decina di volte quel lavoro: due volte siamo passati, il resto... fortezze volanti quattro volte, due attacchi di sommergibili e due di siluranti. I Mas servivano dopo, quando c'era da raccogliere i naufraghi e riportarli a Biserta, e noi a ripararli dai caccia isolati.

« Mi hai scritto che ballavi — concluse — dove? »

« In una camera vuota di sopra; con lui e con altri ragazzetti » aggiunse pronta la signora Borghi, un quieto sorriso sulle labbra. E poi: « Non sei stanco? Vuoi che andiamo? » Si alzarono e uscirono.

Passai nella saletta attigua dove si giocava, sforzandomi di sfuggire all'immagine che mi assillava già dal pomeriggio, della porta di comunicazione delle nostre camere, la quale permetteva di udire distintamente anche le parole pronunciate a bassa voce. Dal preciso ricordo dell'ora che lessi sulla pendola delle scale, quando salii in camera, sono sicuro di aver indugiato a lungo presso i tavoli da giuoco, in lotta con la tentazione; ma davanti alla mia porta e quindi nella camera essa mi spinse a non produrre rumori di sorta per non far sentire a quei due vicini la mia presenza. Parlavano del figlio, e mentre mi spogliavo al buio, la Borghi enumerò i progressi che egli aveva fatto nel carattere e nel linguaggio. La sua voce mi arrivava più distinta di quella del marito, segno che essa si trovava già a letto, perché la spalliera era appoggiata al muro comune e toccava lo stipite interno della porta di comunicazione. Conoscevo benissimo la dislocazione dei mobili e la

peculiarità sonora dei suoi diversi punti per esserci stato molte volte, nel periodo della mia servizievole passione, cosicché la scena che era probabilmente illuminata dalla sola lampada a capo del letto, mi appariva tanto chiaramente da darmi l'illusione di esserle diviso unicamente da un vetro. Per alcuni minuti pensai di raccogliermi con la testa sotto le coperte ma la legale legittimità del mio posto, la pavida consolazione della solitudine, e più ancora il morboso desiderio morale di rendermi conto di come quella donna potesse accogliere e ricambiare quel secondo amore d'uomo, vinsero ogni riluttanza e mi posi risolutamente ad ascoltare.

Si era fatto silenzio di là; poi la donna pronunciò il nome del marito: « Claudio », disse, sottile. Lui, la voce più vicina perché doveva averla raggiunta, ma nuova, avvolgente e carica, le domandò: « Come ti sei comportata in questi mesi? »; io credo che il tono volesse essere affettuoso e ironico. « Bene, in che modo avrei dovuto comportarmi? ». Il poco sangue che avevo nel corpo diaccio mi salì alla testa; questo cui stavo assistendo era in un certo senso più inviolabile della stessa copritura carnale, era l'intimità sacra, l'intimità singolare e umana della parola e dei sentimenti, ma non potevo fare a meno di ascoltare, e questo era anche straordinariamente comico, ad un tempo.

« Comunque devi essere stata molto occupata ».

« Perché? »

« Oh, avrai dovuto perdere un sacco di tempo a curarti il viso, a scegliere il vestito da indossare, ho visto che ti sei portata quello verde scollato che non mi piaceva e che ti avevo pregato di mettere solo in mia presenza ».

« Non l'ho mai messo, l'ho portato perché speravo di indossarlo per te ».

« Sicura come eri che sarei venuto qui su, vero? »

« Per scaramanzia, Claudio, hai visto che ha funzionato ».

« E poi le scarpe, le calze, il rossetto, le sigarette ».

« Ma perché mi dici questo, Claudio? »

« Lasciavi passare quattro, cinque giorni, una volta perfino una settimana, prima di rispondere alle mie lettere ».

« Non è vero, Claudio, subito lo stesso giorno, al più tardi l'indomani; non calcoli i ritardi ».

« E le date?! Potevi almeno camuffare le date ».

« A quale scopo? »

« Oh, insomma ci sono le date. Se sapevi di voler mentire,

non dovevi abbandonare sul comò la busta dove è stampigliato il giorno dell'arrivo ».

« Ti confonderai, Claudio, è una delle tante ».

« Non avevo altro a che pensare, a te e alle lettere, ho tutti i giorni qui nella testa, anche in volo, sempre ».

Il Borghi attese una risposta, che non venne, e quando riprese a parlare il suo tono si era fatto proprio cupo e teso.

« Sei vile come sempre, non ti andava di farlo subito, avevi altro per la testa, ma preparavi la scusa servendoti dei ritardi postali. Perché non ammetterlo, o credi che io speculi sulla guerra, che pensi che lo stare al fronte possa far aumentare di diritto i sentimenti della moglie, un dovere? »

« Non ho mai pensato a questo ».

« Chissà quanto ti saranno costate quelle lettere, con tutte quelle frasi! »

« Le ho scritte, perché sentivo di scriverle ».

Avrebbero potuto sembrarmi ridicole le querule domande di lui, e certo una qualche sorpresa dovettero procurarmi perché contrastavano a tutta prima con l'impressione che di lui avevo avuto, pure l'effetto che ebbero su di me fu altro, di un lamento triste e doloroso da considerare con pietà, un dolore degno di un uomo. E se due o tre sere dopo approdai a una conclusione imprevedibile, non per questo dimisi la mia partecipazione alle sue sofferenze, perché malauguratamente avevo visto una faccia della sua donna che egli non avrebbe mai avuto davanti a sé, e che tuttavia, nonostante la ben congegnata maschera, egli riusciva ad attingere, attraverso la sua carne e un suo inesplicabile potere.

« Se non ti conoscessi bene — le andava dicendo — potrei anche cascarci. Qualche volta ho pensato, qualche volta?... pensavo che non ci fosse niente di male nella vivacità che dimostri vicino agli altri uomini, poteva essere il tuo modo di intendere la vita assieme agli estranei; che tu fossi capace di..., aah! e poi ricontrollavo ogni particolare sperando che tutto passasse liscio, e invece l'episodio di Alfiero mi bloccava, bloccava tutto, mi faceva toccare con mano la tua vera natura ».

« È stata sempre una tua idea, quella, perché avevo accettato stupidamente di ballare in costume da bagno. Solo una fissazione, Claudio ».

« E il resto? Tu poi devi avere la proprietà di attirare le persone più ignobili. Come quello del piazzale ».

« Chi? »

« Credi che mi sia sfuggito eh? quell'uomo in maglione. Lo hai conosciuto, no? »

« Ma di chi stai parlando? »

« Ecco uno dei momenti in cui... Sai benissimo di chi sto parlando ».

« Ti giuro che... ».

« Lo hai conosciuto? »

« Vuoi dire quello che stava seduto accanto a Gabriele, quando sei arrivato? »

« Visto che ci intendiamo? »

« Ma Claudio! Ecco, ecco di cosa parliamo dopo quattro mesi di lontananza. Ti pare giusto? Mi aggredisci come se avessi commesso chi sa cosa ».

« Quello che mi piacerebbe sapere è almeno perché è partito ».

« Partito? »

« Ti dispiace? L'ho visto quando sono sceso col bambino. Chi è? »

« É un commerciante di non so che cosa ».

« Si chiama? »

« Non so, non ricordo. Rangoni, un nome così ».

« Sei stata mai sola con lui? »

« Mai! »

« Da quanto tempo era qui? »

« O Dio, una settimana, mi pare ».

« Tu non sapevi che sarebbe partito? »

« Perché avrebbe dovuto comunicarmelo; avremo scambiato sì e no venti parole. Domandalo a Gabriele. Sono stata sempre con quel ragazzo. Lui vedi mi ha fatto la corte, oh è un ragazzo educato ».

« Avrai ballato però, no? »

« Una sola volta; capirai! O Claudio, ti prego! »

« Io ti prego, come altre volte; ci potrà essere un momento in cui tu riesca a dimenticare la tua natura di donna, un gesto di lealtà, potremmo venirci incontro. Credi che non saprei apprezzarti? Ti assicuro non importano i fatti, non mi ci fermerei, è la menzogna che odio, il sotterfugio. Non ne soffrirei neppure, tanta sarebbe la gioia di avere una donna su cui poter contare ciecamente. Non rispondi, vero? »

« Ma cosa dovrei dirti, non ho niente da dirti, niente. Ogni volta così, ogni volta; o Claudio, ti prego! »

« Questa è la realtà, ritornare a essere come un cane. Ma non credere che non succeda. Spero che un giorno qualcuno mi scriva una lettera anonima, mi racconti. Ti ammazzerei, tu ora lo sai bene perché, ti farei diventare la carne nera ».

Durante le ultime frasi la sua voce si era avvicinata e in-

grandita tanto che per un momento ebbi l'impressione che quel sussurro aspro e ansioso egli lo soffiasse sul legno della porta, verso di me. Poi il tono si incrinò e le parole gli uscirono rotte, disordinate, quasi che la corrispondenza tra cervello e gola si fosse interrotta, ed egli precipitasse verso un indicibile inferno.

« Il tarlo, il tarlo nelle ossa ho — continuò — e te lo farei pagare caro, ogni minuto di disperazione, ogni attimo di dubbio, di angoscia. Qualcosa — urlò — in questa maledetta, sporca carne di bugiarda ».

Qui la donna prese a singhiozzare, e sentii il letto percosso da rumori sì violenti che mi drizzai fuor dalle lenzuola, col cuore in tumulto; ma dalla stanza attigua non venne più alcuna parola, e sul silenzio che sembrava tragico fiorirono lentamente brevi, sommessi sospiri, e poi, di seguito, affannosi respiri e frenetici lamenti, della cui natura, stupefatto e incredulo, mi resi conto alfine quando, su i furibondi e rapidi amanti scesero la quiete e il sonno.

Mi addormentai molto tardi, dopo aver cucito in varie guise le sconclusionate sensazioni avute da quella imprevedibile congiunzione, e senza riuscire a darle un senso che non urtasse gli opposti ingredienti della scena precedente.

V

Del giorno dopo e del successivo non mi rimane altro ricordo che quello dell'eccitazione provocata la sera dell'8 dalla notizia dell'armistizio. La mattina del 9 cominciarono a diffondersi le prime voci sulla calata delle divisioni tedesche attraverso i varchi alpini, e il panico prese la nostra sparuta comunità. Nessuno sapeva a quale decisione votarsi, alcuni se ne tornarono in città, convinti al pari di quelli che rimasero di commettere una azione avventata. Quasi tutti pensando che in frangenti di quella specie l'appartenenza agli alti gradi dell'esercito fornisse una privilegiata facoltà di divinazione, si rivolsero per consiglio al maggiore Borghi, quando al contrario la sua posizione era più precaria della loro; il comunicato di Badoglio, come lasciava in balia di se stessi i comandi di armata, tanto meno conteneva indicazioni che servissero al suo caso particolare, e poiché egli avrebbe dovuto rientrare in servizio il 15 settembre, l'unica possibilità di scelta egli la poteva trarre dalla sua personale iniziativa.

Nel dubbio il Borghi pensò di rivolgersi al Comando Militare di Belluno; e così prese l'avvio il 10, l'ultima parte di quella villeggiatura, che doveva concludersi il giorno dopo. Mi sembrò contento che gli avessi proposto di accompagnarlo; i trenta chilometri che ci volevano per arrivare a Belluno non erano poi tanto pochi, e assieme, li avremmo percorsi con minore fatica. Subito dopo aver fatto colazione, verso l'una inforcammo le biciclette che le Holzer avevano messo premurosamente a nostra disposizione, e ci buttammo giù per la lunga discesa, che portava al fondovalle.

Il tempo ci era favorevole, e ciò non mi fu di scarso sollievo, dato che una contrarietà naturale, quali avrebbero potuto essere un cielo chiuso da nuvole o una temperatura calda e afosa, avrebbe scoperto troppo sensibilmente le preminenti ragioni di quella mia offerta di andare con lui, e avrebbe pertanto raddoppiato con la spiacevolezza del viaggio, i morsi dell'ambiguità; perché ad essa ero stato spinto non da una simpatia delle preoccupazioni né tanto meno da un turistico impulso al movimento, quanto dal bisogno che avevo di trovarmi solo con lui per spiare attraverso gli interstizi di un contatto diretto la soluzione ai tormentosi enigmi che lui e la moglie mi avevano proposto. Non vi era una nuvola su tutto l'azzurro catino della grande vallata, ma nell'aria lievemente mossa vibrava un primo sentimento dell'autunno; la massicciata della strada era compatta e poco polverosa e i campi ci fuggivano veloci di fianco, odorosi di verde, di muschio, di terra, di legno bagnato e di insetti. Ad un tratto mi prese una tanto matta allegria che dovetti cantare a squarciagola; essa si contagiò al mio taciturno compagno, e poco dopo egli urlava al vento cose insensate. Alle curve, poiché la sua bicicletta non aveva freni lo raggiungevo in tempo affinché si appoggiasse a me, ed egli sedendosi di sghembo sul sellino, alzava di lato la gamba destra e premeva la suola della scarpa sul copertone anteriore, la cui corsa in tal modo veniva rallentata. Fummo in breve al termine della discesa, sul ponte dal quale la vista si chiude entro le opposte muraglie della valle di Agordo, e qui la nostra amicizia poté dirsi fondata; la rafforzò la statale deserta, asfaltata e piana, il senso spiegato di quiete agreste che ci circondò non appena passammo il fiume.

Interrogato, il Borghi mi raccontò di sé la giovinezza sportiva, gli studi all'Università di Firenze, la scelta della carriera aeronautica come il frutto di un malinteso spirito di avventura, il periodo della scuola d'acrobazia e le prime battaglie

in Libia; mi parlò di suo padre, ex ufficiale degli arditi e accanito fascista, che passava i suoi giorni di pensionato a ripetere che l'invasione era il risultato del 25 luglio, e che eravamo ormai preda di una quinta colonna. « Questo non sarà mica vero? » gli chiesi. « Sarebbe comodo! — mi rispose — Gabriele, un giorno dovremo discutere seriamente con i nostri padri. Le imbecillità che ci insegnavano alle adunate lui a casa me le confermava, mi ripassava la lezione. In Marmarica ero convinto che avremmo battuto quei porci degli inglesi in una settimana, chissà poi se per il fatto che loro fossero porci, o che noi eravamo la formidabile aviazione dell'impero! ». Non sapevo come fare per portarlo sull'argomento che mi stava a cuore, ma in pari tempo la prudenza e il pudore si confortavano al sentirlo parlare di ritirate, di sconfitte e di morti.

« Per quelli che muoiono — dissi a un certo punto — la questione rimane al padre, alla madre, ma per quelli che durano non ci saranno solo i problemi della guerra, che so, delle munizioni per esempio; non ne hanno altri, altre ferite, i rapporti umani interrotti, la lontananza, i parenti? »

Ai lati della strada erano comparse le prime case della periferia, ville, casolari con un velo d'intonaco e vasi di gerani sui balconi. Vedemmo donne e ragazzi sulla porta o alle finestre, e davanti ai cancelli o sul ciglio dell'asfalto gruppi di uomini; pareva una domenica pomeriggio, e non era perché mancavano gli inconfondibili rumori, la posata levità dei giorni di festa, in paese; ci guardavano passare, assorti in una curiosità taciturna. Di tanto in tanto una frase gridata, un nome, scalfiva il silenzio, provava a inseguirci, ma restava indietro, non trovando resistenza e ascolto, subito inghiottita dal folto dei cespugli e dal muro degli orti. Non continuammo il dialogo perché quella atmosfera aveva abbracciato anche noi, e ci trascinava nella sfera delle sensazioni collettive.

Là dove le case si assembravano, riducendo lo spazio al verde, e cioè dando inizio alla città vera e propria, scorgemmo una gran quantità di gente in mezzo alla strada, che ci costrinse a rallentare e a fermarci. Avevano il naso per aria, rivolto agli alti muri e ai finestrone spalancati di un robusto edificio, dal cui portone uscivano dei militari che reggevano valigie di fibra, di legno laccato di nero, o, a tracolla, sacchi e zaini. Si guardavano intorno come a cercare un suggerimento sulla direzione da prendere, scambiavano qualche frase con i borghesi, si frammischiavano ad essi, se ne allontanavano. Era la caserma di una divisione alpina. Tre contadini anziani si

infilarono nel portone e di lì a poco vi erano due correnti, una di soldati che usciva e una di borghesi, appunto, che entrava.

« Ma cosa diavolo sta succedendo? » mormorò il Borghi, affidandomi nel contempo la bicicletta; ripeté la domanda ad alta voce, rivolta a un soldato che facendosi largo tra quella folla si era venuto a trovare di fronte a lui. Quelli che erano a noi più vicini si voltarono a esaminarci e l'interpellato squadrò il mio compagno dalla testa ai piedi, non più giovane, una faccia scontenta irosa solcata da rughe profonde, abbronzata dal sole.

« La guerra è finita per noi, ce ne torniamo a casa, se non le dispiace » disse.

« Ma chi vi ha dato quest'ordine? » insisté il Borghi.

« L'ordine? » disse l'alpino, volgendosi attorno quasi a voler spartire con gli altri la constatazione della stupida assurdità di quella domanda.

« Ce lo siamo dati noi, in mancanza di altri ».

« E i vostri ufficiali? » esclamò il Borghi, con un tono più duro, ma una minore sicurezza.

« Lei li vede? » chiese l'altro, e dopo aver rifatto al Borghi la sua bocca spalancata, si fece strada tra gli astanti e scomparve. La folla si era nel frattempo ingrossata, ed essendosi probabilmente sciolto il rispetto che quel fabbricato incuteva, vinta la perplessità dagli incitamenti che i militari stessi le rivolgevano, cominciò ad entrarvi con foga, spingendosi e comprimendosi sulla soglia. Il Borghi mi trasse indietro: era bianco in volto e tremava. Un secondo soldato gli passò vicino ed egli gli afferrò un braccio. « Senti, fammi capire, spiegami, questo disordine, ma che razza di soldati siete? ». Questi era giovane, roseo il volto, due esili baffetti sulla bocca carnosa; colse evidentemente l'autorità che era nella voce di quello sconosciuto e rispose prontamente: « Che si poteva fare? Saranno qui a momenti, signore ». « Chi? » « Ma i tedeschi; i disce che i sia za a Ponte dee Alpi. I sarà incazai come tori, e cusì xe meio che no i ne trova, no ghe par? »

Come se il nome della razza terribile pronunciato dal giovane soldato si fosse diffuso fulmineamente, e avesse avuto il potere di risvegliare un latente terrore, gli alpini che riuscivano a superare la calca dinanzi all'ingresso, ora affrettavano il passo, correvano. Il giovane tese la mano al Borghi, ma questi la trattenne nella sua. « Senti, c'è il Comando Territoriale qui a Belluno, dove si trova? »

« Non c'è più nessuno, là. Abbiamo tentato fino a poco fa di avere ordini, notizie: ghe gera restà soo el telefonista, i sea ga batua tuti, più in pressa de noaltri ».

Un rumore di battimani e di esclamazioni interruppe quella conversazione, e mentre il soldato che si stava allontanando ci gridava un « Buona fortuna! », vedemmo alle finestre del secondo piano alcuni alpini che facevano il gesto di buttar giù qualcosa; dopo che una parte della folla si fu spostata sotto di loro, tre materassi piombarono sul selciato sollevando nuvole di polvere e di seguito giubbe, cinture e coperte grigio-verdi volteggiarono sugli aspettanti che se li disputarono con combattivo accanimento. « Vieni Gabriele — mi disse il Borghi — torniamocene all'albergo ».

« Si fida di quel soldato? » gli chiesi, ma non mi diede retta; sul momento provai un senso di avversione nei confronti di quell'uomo che mi avrebbe riempito la testa, ne ero certo, di amare invettive, quand'io invece avrei preferito non allontanarmi da quello strano e vivido spettacolo, nel quale la confusione e il chiasso avevano una nota di liberata allegria, e che mi avrebbe potuto riservare chissà quali scene spregiudicate e nuove. L'infantile disappunto passò non appena ripercorso il tratto della periferia, ritrovammo la strada tranquilla e solitaria.

« E adesso — gli domandai, mettendomi al suo fianco — cosa accadrà? E lei? »

« Che faranno i tedeschi, secondo lei? » insistetti.

« Che ne so, che diavolo vuoi che sappia io, sono un ufficiale dell'Esercito italiano, la puttana degli eserciti ».

Lo pregai di andare meno velocemente, ricordandogli che la strada era lunga e l'ultimo tratto, in salita, faticoso; obbedì passivo, di colpo, segno che con quella pedalata furiosa che aveva tenuto da quando era risalito in bicicletta, si era difeso dal primo, intontito attacco di disperazione. Il secondo lo contrastò con un lungo, disarticolato monologo, pieno di frammenti di vita militare e di dati tecnici, di cui ricordo solo quei brani, dai quali infine egli pervenne a parlare della moglie:

« Con tutto il caos e il caso che governa una campagna, non c'è niente che una volta avvenuto non si possa svelare pieno di senso e di significato. La Grecia! I soldati per lo più, se potessero parlare! Hai presente gli S. 79, progettati nel '35, li continuarono a costruire anche quando quegli altri ebbero caccia a 650 chilometri orari, perché?, perché lo Stato Maggiore non se la sentiva di interrompere le ordinazioni all'industria protetto da Mussolini... La grande industria fascista.

Ma pensa alle riviste, a quei tacchini colle greche, gli stivaloni eroici, due volte mi portarono ai loro riti sull'Altare della Patria, io ero commosso, forse anche fiero, e loro mi fottevano coi discorsi e il melodramma di cartapesta... l'imponente dimostrazione di forza, di giovinezza, di impeto guerriero di quel pazzo idiota, ed eravamo un esercito degno al più di figurare bene nella marcia dell'Aida! »

Il timbro della sua voce era alterato, aspro e stridulo, l'altezza superiore al normale e si andava vieppiù alzando, il volume smisurato, quasi un urlo; non provavo alcun imbarazzo, perché non vi era alcun elemento di recitazione nella sua voce, solo l'obbedienza a disastrosi echi interiori, e una accettata dimenticanza di qualsiasi cosa esterna, e quindi anche della mia persona.

« Nessuno pensi di piegarci senza prima avere duramente combattuto. Ma santo Dio, ma santo benedetto Iddio. Stronzo! — gridò — dove sei adesso con la mascella quadrata e gli occhi d'acciaio? »

Un corvo, spaventato, si alzò sfrusciando da un cespuglio di nocciole, guardò dall'alto il nastro d'asfalto e ricadde più in là, entro un boschetto di lecci.

« La patria — proseguì — un branco di maiali ladri al comando di un esercito di pezzenti. Tu sei giovane, tu e quelli della tua età, dovete imparare qualcosa ».

Bloccò la bicicletta e appoggiò i piedi a terra; io mi fermai accanto a lui.

« Che risultati! Quattro anni perduti, lontano da mia moglie, che avrei potuto passare con lei, la mia bella moglie che mi aspettava, inverni estati primavere inverni, li avremmo trascorsi insieme nella nostra casa, da soli, la mia donna meravigliosa ». Qui staccò le mani dal manubrio e lasciò ricadere le braccia inerti lungo i fianchi. Potevo dirgli che l'aveva tradito?

« Vorrei — sussurrò, tanto piano che a malapena potei distinguere le parole — essere già al punto di non dover andare più in alcun luogo ».

Mi parve di intuire in quest'ultima frase del mio compagno non una conclusione dello sfogo d'amarrezza ma qualcosa di più grave, un collasso o una morte, come se, al pari della luce e del suono che da una unica sorgente ci pervengono in momenti successivi perché diversi le facoltà e i mezzi onde si propagano, la scena della caserma che aveva colpito da prima il suo intelletto eccitandolo a ragionare su di essa e muovendo

appena i connessi, convenzionali sentimenti, soltanto adesso, dopo averla filtrata nella memoria interna della sua intera esistenza, egli la percepisse nella durezza ineluttabile dei suoi simboli. Rimontò in sella e riavviò la bicicletta; io mi portai una ventina di metri più avanti, per non imporre la mia inutile presenza ai suoi desolati pensieri. Intorno a noi la campagna era immersa nella fredda, riservata solennità che precede il crepuscolo e il sole già basso metteva le ombre degli alberi attraverso la strada; un leggero vento di settentrione rendeva nitide e serene le tinte ancora accese della vallata, il verde delle ondulate colline, il grigio e, più lontano, l'azzurro delle sue ampie pareti. Procedemmo così, uno dietro l'altro, fino al termine del viaggio, e fu sera quando entrammo nel paese.

VI

La signora Borghi ci aspettava sui gradini della chiesa, e la trovammo preoccupata, ansiosa di novità. L'albergo era pieno di gente, arrivata nel pomeriggio da Padova, da Treviso, da Venezia, a cercar riparo dalla imminente tempesta. La radio aveva diffuso i primi proclami della ripresa fascista, ma l'attenzione generale era rivolta ai tedeschi, dei quali si diceva che avessero già occupato le principali stazioni ferroviarie. Le febbrili conversazioni dei villeggianti, vecchi e nuovi, continuarono a lungo dopo il pranzo, nel salone e al bar, e vi prestai ascolto, però a poco a poco sulle notizie, in verità assai scarse e contraddittorie, prevalsero gli stati d'animo, e dato che la Borghi e il marito se ne erano andati a passeggiare nel parco, le confessioni, le paure e le storie private di tutti quegli sconosciuti finirono per infastidirmi, e spenta ogni curiosità me ne andai a letto. Ero scontento e deluso; le immagini degli avvenimenti degli ultimi giorni giravano a vuoto nella mia testa stanca e poiché si sottraevano ad ogni ordine e giudizio, o ero io a sottrarmi a un tale insostenibile impegno, in breve tempo il meccanismo della ripetizione si guastò e i particolari più diversi cominciarono a combinarsi tra loro in mille modi, gettandomi prima nell'angoscia e poi nel sonno. In questo ancora non ebbi riposo, in quanto che mi trovai nei panni odiati del Rangoni e successivamente in quelli del marito a corteggiare una Borghi irraggiungibile e canzonatoria, che riconoscendomi sotto i goffi travestimenti mi dileggiava, invogliandomi a entrare in lei e sfuggendomi ratta non appena l'avevo toccata; ed era cotesto un gioco, ancorché solcato da

indefinibili afflizioni, che dava spazio all'espansione dei miei sensi, un gioco impregnato di un odore dolciastro, attaccaticcio, debolmente convulso, nel quale il mio cervello avrebbe insistito sino all'esaudimento, se ad un tratto, già a mezzo della notte, per un improvviso cedimento del sonno o per un rumore esterno che l'aveva lacerato, non mi fossi svegliato di soprassalto. Tesi gli orecchi, per quell'imperio che il buio ha sull'udito, di lì a qualche istante mi giunse dalla camera accanto la voce della signora Borghi e subito dopo quella del marito; ed esse furon tali che la sensazione della realtà mi venne meno ed ebbi l'impressione di essere rientrato nel sogno. Giacché quelle erano voci di un dialogo già udito e quindi, appartenendo al passato, non potevano che essere di una sua forma o fantasma. Diceva il Borghi:

« Ti ricordi il nostro fidanzamento, il bene che dimostravi di volermi? »

« Per me — rispondeva la donna — non è cambiato niente ».

« Ebbene, proprio per questo amore, una volta sola, puoi dirmi la verità? Ti prego. Lo sai che potrei averla da altri, ti rendi conto che allora sarebbe la fine? Da te io la voglio, voglio che sia tu a dirmela. Quante volte hai parlato della profonda amicizia che è nel nostro matrimonio! Ti scongiuro, Marcella. Ecco, mi metto così; non ti guardo, aspetto ».

La donna rispose lamentosamente:

« Non ho niente da dirti, Claudio, niente ».

« Mi lasci così; dunque, ancora una volta! ? »

« Tu pretendresti che io ti confessassi ciò che non ho commesso. Non posso aiutarti Claudio. Guardami: avrei la forza di sostenere il tuo sguardo, dirti che non ti ho mai tradito, e mentirti? Non ti basta questo? »

Un fruscio violento troncò queste ultime parole, e poteva esser stato che l'uomo si fosse staccato dall'abbraccio o dal peso del corpo di lei, con ira. Erano frattanto svanite in me le intraviste ombre del sogno; da quell'istante il dialogo procedette ancor più fedelmente sulla falsariga dell'altro, di tre sere prima, con parole che davano voce a identici moti dell'animo, disperate furie e resistenze pietose, sino ai singhiozzi conclusivi, al silenzio e all'amore.

Fu la risoluzione, per la seconda volta inaspettata, con l'intensità disgustosa dei suoi rantoli e dei suoi soffocati spazimi finali, che mi fece balenare una diversa realtà da quella che immediatamente appariva nelle deprimenti scene della

commedia preparatoria; come se essa fosse il percorso obliquo bensì e assurdo, ma unico e indispensabile a quell'uomo per arrivare allo stimolo e allo scopo, un rito insomma predisposto dai complici sensi attraverso la prepotente selezione dei suoi orgasmi, che egli doveva eseguire perché gli venisse data la breve felicità del possesso. Più avanti con gli anni, quando ebbi a che fare con ostacoli e dolori miei, la gelosia e l'amore mi mostrarono al fondo delle loro combinazioni un aspetto più semplice e ragioni più elementari; allora l'intransitiva solitudine che quell'idea portava con sé, mi abbagliò e ristetti lungamente a riflettere su quel tortuoso congegno di natura, prima di ricadere nel sonno perduto.

Mi svegliai tardi, il sole di già vicino al mezzogiorno. Sepi dalla signora Borghi che il marito era partito la mattina presto, deciso a raggiungere a Roma o dovunque il governo di Badoglio; lei era tranquilla perché lo sapeva in grado di cavarsi di impaccio dalle situazioni più intricate e perché convinta anche lei che la strada da lui scelta fosse la migliore. Mi diede i suoi saluti e mi disse che le aveva parlato bene di me e che mi aveva augurato un destino più fortunato del suo. Eravamo dunque nuovamente soli la Borghi ed io, e tale circostanza ebbe per me il potere di escludere ogni pensiero che non l'avesse a suo centro; sapevo molto di lei e della sua vita segreta e ciò mi illudeva di aver acquistato una condizione dell'animo dalla quale mi sarebbe stato facile fronteggiarla senza apprensioni, e invece fui come prima, una sconnessa maglia di aspettative passive, un oggetto privo di colori alla luce della sua personalità, un'acqua neutra all'essenza inebriante della sua ipnotica vitalità femminile. Fu lei a proporre una passeggiata alla baita del bosco, e fu del pari lei ad arrestarsi all'inizio del sentiero, là dove la stradicciola di campagna, a monte dell'albergo, terminava in un belvedere recinto di cedri. Ci sedemmo sulla tavola di una rustica panchina e per alcuni minuti essa sembrò intenta a mirare il verde panorama sottostante. Io la guardavo di sottocchi, oppresso da una densa emozione.

« Di nuovo soli » dissi, cercando di sorridere. Il suo silenzio appartato mi infuse coraggio. Dissi:

« Sarei bugiardo con me stesso se non riconoscessi di essere contento di trovarmi di nuovo con lei. Sono felice, Marcel-la, lei non può immaginare quanto. Non offendo suo marito, credo che ripeterei queste parole in sua presenza. È che non aspetto alcuna cosa da lei, perché anche se ho sognato tutto,

non oso nemmeno sperare, niente. Mi basta che lei lo sappia, averglielo detto, e poterglielo dire ogni tanto ».

Tenevo anch'io il viso fisso in avanti, la sola posizione che mi consentisse di pronunciare quelle frasi. Non mi rispose ancora e allora continuai così:

« Lei è bella. Non so, forse questo non conta; deve essere il suo viso, gli occhi, quello che è dentro di lei, a muovere così... il mio cuore ». Tacqui, sentendo che si era scossa; aveva voltato la faccia dalla mia parte, per parlare. Ero pieno di melanconia e di struggente entusiasmo, gli opposti confini dell'età giovanile.

« Sei sempre un caro ragazzo » disse, e poi mi chiese: « Rangoni ti ha detto se tornava? »

Rimasi intontito, ed è una testimonianza che la percezione di quelle parole si sia arrestata alla soglia della mia coscienza, il fatto che io non le rammenti nella loro corposità espressiva, nel timbro, probabilmente teso e netto, senza modulazioni, appropriato allo scopo, insensibile, col quale esse dovettero formarsi nella sua bocca e uscirne, ma appena nel loro riflesso entro la cavità della mente, velate, incorporee e fiaccamente insistenti, già astratte. I precipitati sentimenti, una reazione al ridicolo e all'umiliazione, tutto questo esigeva che me ne andassi, l'orgoglio sopravvivate nell'idea dell'abbandono purificatore, della fuga, la dolce, dolcissima fuga; impaziente la Borghi mi ripeté la domanda e questo mi ricondusse alla realtà. L'aria umida che il sole allo zenith evaporava tiepida dal terreno, veniva rapita da folate di una brezza più fresca che si infilava tra i tronchi dei cedri; risposi che se ne era andato senza dirmi nulla, che aveva proprio tagliato la corda, così le dissi. E dopo queste parole, mi sentii per la prima volta libero di fronte a lei, sciolto dalla magia dei miei sogni. « Che bell'aria » dissi, respirando a pieni polmoni. « Che farà adesso — le chiesi — senza il suo Rangoni? ». Si sarebbe dovuto aprire una nuova storia con vergini sguardi e sconosciute impressioni reciproche, un nuovo inimmaginabile scambio, un albero con le radici aeree, e una vertiginosa rottura della vecchia trama, impossibile mondo possibile, che essa respinse, non più giovane e aperta, fedele alla traccia del passato o a quella, profonda, della carne. Si alzò e senza dire parola uscì dall'ombra dei cedri, fu sotto il sole dell'aperta campagna, nella stradicciola in discesa. La guardavo rapito: la leggiadra forma del suo corpo, la rossa chioma impercettibilmente mossa da un alito di vento, quell'incedere tra pigro e

fremente, mi diedero il pensiero soave e curioso che essa aveva perduto con me il suo amante migliore.

Quando, al pomeriggio, dopo aver pagato le Holzer, salii sulla corriera, essa se ne stava seduta su una delle panchine del piazzale, intenta a un lavoro d'aghi; e poiché il suo bambino mi scorre, e rincorrendo la corriera già in moto gridò il mio nome, ebbi il tempo di vederla col viso alzato, stupefatta, lasciar cadere il lavoro, e poi ritta in piedi guardarmi, finché alla curva non scomparve e con lei tutto l'albergo.

Come si conveniva al mio stato, la signora Borghi e il suo avventuroso talento governarono ancora a lungo le mie fantasie, io credo fino a quando il treno, uscito dalla gola di Quero, si perdettero nei vapori azzurri e cinerini che dal Piave si diffondevano oltre gli argini sulla pianura in crepuscolo. La breve vicenda era proprio finita, e io indugiai a domandarmi se sarei ritornato a Trieste, da mio padre, diverso; guardando infatti dal finestrino i prati veneti correre con me incontro al puntuale riposo della notte, mi pareva di avere qualcosa e niente, di quei giorni. Di portare un brano di vita e nessun mistero alla casa che mi aspettava, la vecchia, concreta, stabile nostra casa di viale XX Settembre.

MASSIMO FERRETTI

LA CROCE COPIATIVA

*Nel quaranta avevo cinque anni:
e che la guerra fosse una sciagura
lo capii dalle facce dei parenti
che fecero a chi aveva la più bianca
quando il Benito con la voce dura
annunciò alla radio il grande evento:
e il mio fascismo fu l'oscuramento
di carta viola sui dolci vetri chiari
e il sentire radio-Londra come ladri:
ed io ci presi gusto a questo gioco
troppo importante per non coltivarlo
con tutti i segreti da nascondere
ai figli del fascista che abitava
la casa bianca a sud delle rose...*

*...Era la fisarmonica da noi
la musica che usciva dalle mani:
la musica incantata dei paesi
sorpresi dal novilunio nella valle,
e la musica forte della terra
al tempo del granturco e delle danze:
ma era solo mio il lungo viale
di dolci tigli invasi dalla brezza,
dove il giorno dell'arrivo di Maria
i bambini felici lo gridavano
con incendi di foglie e scacciacani —
ed io vivevo dietro una finestra.*

*L'otto settembre del famoso anno
ero a fare i bagni contro i reumi
alle terme salsoiodiche di Genga:
e ho visto piangere soldati con la barba
strappandosi divise e baionette
e implorando vestiti da civile.*

*Poi sfollammo per la prima volta
in un vecchio convento abbandonato
che aveva un immenso cortile
e in mezzo al cortile un gran pozzo
pieno di acqua e di stelle
tutte le notti più belle;
e Nunziatina cantava
aspettando l'amore terrestre;
e una vedova giovane e fresca
di giorno faceva la sarta
e vestiva tanta campagna
e di sera aveva un amico
che per lei camminava nel buio:
e nel buio dell'ultima rampa
una sera più buia di sempre
fu un tedesco a bruciare un cerino:
le sue truppe tornavano indietro
spingendo lungo le strade
il bestiame di tutte le stalle
e prendendo come pastori
gli uomini a tiro di mitra:
e gli uomini del nostro convento
con la radio fissata su Londra
e le carte per fare il ramino
e una lunga scala a pioli
scomparvero tutti in soffitta
e mio padre che era un po' grosso
per quel pertugio da magri
rimase mezzo di fuori.*

*Poi scendemmo da un contadino
in una buca sperduta
che per volere di Dio*

*fu il cuore della battaglia:
era una strana famiglia,
quella del contadino:
un vecchio pudico e robusto
una vecchia curva e tranquilla
un figlio abbastanza sonnambulo
e un'ex-monaca matta
che accarezzava i conigli.*

*E gli aerei scendevano bassi
a mitragliare le oche
e il bianco bagnato dei panni:
gli aerei arrivavano a stormi
da dietro le nuvole inermi
e tutti scappavano a branco
nel rifugio a sud del pagliaio:
soltanto la monaca matta
restava nel mezzo dell'aia
allucinata al contatto
dei galli con le galline
sempre innocenti e felici
nel loro regno del sole:
io non potevo fuggire:
per me, correre era morire:
e restavo dentro la stalla
che aveva le mura massicce
in compagnia di mia madre
che aveva un grammofoño in cuore
che ripeteva sommesso:
« il fulmine è proprio lo stesso,
quando rimbomba è passato »,
e c'era la nostra paura
e il pianto di qualche vitello.*

*E un giorno in motocicletta
tre disertori tedeschi
in cambio di panni borghesi
e d'un maiale affettato
allontanandosi in fretta
dissero che il giorno seguente*

avremmo sentito il cannone:
 e il cannone guidò i carrarmati
 che scesero dalle colline
 tra nuvolette nerastre:
 e si era proprio felici
 che quelli sparassero a salve
 per dare più luce alla festa:
 ma quando una nuvoletta
 si fermò vicino alla casa
 e i vetri delle finestre
 andarono a spasso per l'aria,
 la festa si sciolse in silenzio
 nel rifugio di terra battuta
 dove la preghiera più ipocrita
 mormorata da donne montate
 su ogni fosso un po' asciutto
 e da uomini giganteschi —
 professionisti della bestemmia —
 era ogni tanto interrotta
 dal fiatone di qualche garzone
 in fuga verso le linee
 dove volava l'uccello
 che di solito porta i bambini:
 e tra un pater e un'ave maria
 maledivano un prete fascista
 che dall'alto del campanile
 faceva — a voce di popolo —
 segnali ai tedeschi appostati:
 poi avanzarono gli alleati
 e poi ritornarono indietro
 e per tre giorni infiniti
 passeggiarono in camionetta
 lungo una strada coperta
 sparando il mitra coi guanti
 contro i cespugli deserti,
 mangiando pane di riso
 e bevendo immancabilmente
 con le tazze legate sul culo
 l'aromatico tè dell'oriente:
 e nel rifugio di terra

*si continuava a pregare:
 io non potevo pregare:
 avevo troppo appetito:
 per tutti i mesi d'attesa
 che il cannone venisse a salvarci,
 isolati da ogni dottore,
 avevo curato la febbre
 e le troppe crepe del cuore
 con bistecche e grassi pollastri:
 volevo tanto guarire
 e mangiare era cacare
 cacare era digerire
 digerire era dormire
 dormire era non-pensare
 e pensare era morire
 e vivere era mangiare:
 e lì tra tante preghiere
 mangiavo formaggio e miele,
 contavo le cannonate
 che cadevano troppo vicino
 e giocavo come sempre
 con tre bossoli d'aereoplano
 che nonno m'aveva portato
 dopo un mitragliamento:
 ero un bambino contento
 sicuro che nel futuro
 sarei stato anche bello:
 per fare un fijo bello
 ce vole un tifarello:
 e adorai la febbre che consuma
 la febbre che si legge nel mercurio
 e la pregai che mi restasse accanto
 e mi facesse diventare alto...*

*E poi m'hanno portato sulle spalle
 nella fuga rabbiosa in mezzo ai campi,
 tra cieli di schegge e tappeti di mine:
 e ho visto padre e madre e mio fratello
 appoggiati contro un muro della morte
 davanti ad un canneto di fucili:*

*era uno sbaglio:
me se tutto finì bene non importa:
la preghiera al dio onnipotente
del bambino malato e ad occhi secchi —
l'unico lasciato nella casa
perché sarebbe morto per le scale —
quella preghiera resta ancora vergine:
ed io pregai d'aver tanta forza
da staccare dal muro la doppietta
e massacrare quelle divise sporche.*

*E poi ho ascoltato un'agonia in anticipo
in una camera priva di respiro
sopra un letto di foglie di tabacco,
e dal soffitto cadevano gli intonachi
perché i cannoni erano nell'orto.*

*Signore, concedimi di vivere l'istante
in cui ti possa chiedere perdono
con il candore della prima neve:
io ti pregavo dove c'era il sole
e tu vivevi nelle buie chiese,
rifugio ambiguo di vecchie peccatrici
e aperto porto di sporche ipocrisie:
ricordo le mie lacrime innocenti
davanti al vecchio prete di campagna
al tempo della Prima Comunione,
e il tragico ospedale di pianura
dove all'incubo umano della morte
si aggiunse il tuo incubo divino
nella mia secca gola di malato
che fermò nel palato l'Ostia santa
sacrilega inghiottita con la spinta
d'un soave bicchiere d'acqua pura...*

*...E i santi del mio lento calendario
sono stati i Dottori in Medicina:
ho conosciuto i medici in calesse
e quelli che scrivono ricette*

*parlando in dittafori d'avorio:
 m'hanno messo il ghiaccio dentro il corpo
 quando dovevo sudare nel deserto,
 m'hanno infilzato liquidi inquinati
 senza chiedere scusa o tormentarsi;
 e un esperto dottore senza figli
 perché lasciavo anzitempo il suo ospedale
 ha sorriso che avrei dovuto vivere
 dentro una campana di bel vetro:
 ed ora marcisce al cimitero
 e i suoi vermi sarebbero felici
 di scivolare su un vetro trasparente...*

*Quando tornammo — dopo la tragedia
 d'una guerra con trincee civili —
 un castello era Chiaravalle,
 un maniero rovinato dalla storia:
 e i morti li ho cercati in qualche cosa:
 una famiglia — in un cane attaccabrighe;
 un ragazzo — in una lucertola impiccata;
 l'ospedale — nel cappello d'una suora:
 e aveva nuove piazze il mio paese
 ma queste piazze erano senz'alberi.*

*Ma era ancora verde la mia casa
 con l'albero le glicini e le rose:
 e avrei voluto avere braccia immense
 per poterla abbracciare in una volta:
 e l'odio mi respinse in uno sguardo:
 la occupavano gli « alleati » inglesi
 — gli angeli della radio dei miracoli
 e gli stessi aviatori delle bombe —
 e avevano bruciato le persiane
 dopo tutte le porte immacolate
 e il pavimento di faggio del soffitto
 e spaccavano la legna con l'accetta
 sulle sacre mattonelle delle stanze,
 e avevano pisciato sulle rose
 che lentamente si stavano seccando,
 e il giardino era una foresta,
 e gli inglesi non cacavano nel cesso*

*ma nei bidoni dentro la capanna
che appena colmi seppellivano in giardino:
fu concimato dalla merda inglese.*

*E in quattro per un anno e mezzo
vivemmo in una stanza e mezzo
a venti metri dalla nostra casa:
e in un tavolo largo un metro e mezzo
in fondo al letto d'una stanza e mezzo
mio padre riprese a lavorare
disegnando a colori tante case
per i nuovi clienti bombardati:
e nello spazio di quella stanza e mezzo
ho soffocato qualche grido immenso:
forse una notte nel colmo dell'estate
quando i nazisti mi vennero a svegliare
sparando con le navi dal mio mare.*

*E i giorni eterni invasi dal grigiore
della pioggia limpida e feroce
quando ero stanco di tutte le leggende
che inventavo per la corsa degli ombrelli,
disegnavo i sogni col coltello
su rami di ligustro e canne verdi;
e i giorni brevi invasi dalla luce
varcavo la strada fino a un pozzo
e su un lembo del muretto di cemento
c'era dipinta una « dama » col carbone,
e con pedine di sassi colorati
si giocava la vittoria dell'onore;
e c'erano bambine con le bambole
che giocavano a fare le signore,
e monelli che giocavano a rincorrersi
o al pallone o a esplodere cartucce
di fucile con un chiodo ed un mattone;
e in un folto canneto oltre il pozzo
a sinistra delle case diroccate
ci andavano a dormire i militari —
gli italiani, il nostro vero esercito:
e il pomeriggio annuvolato e greve*

dell'ultima Pasqua prigioniera
 un ragazzo lanciò un sasso aguzzo
 sulla schiena d'un soldato addormentato:
 per gli altri fu facile fuggire,
 non per me, con le natiche fasciate
 per due grosse iniezioni soporate:
 e il soldato del nostro vero esercito
 mi afferrò e mi diede due zampate:
 ed è terribile avere tanta forza
 e doverla riservare per l'inverno
 se questo inverno mio può sopraggiungere
 mentre l'estate si avvolge nella luce:
 e nei frammenti liberi di morte
 sono corso dentro il mare della vita
 con la gioia preistorica dell'essere
 che vola nelle piume degli uccelli
 ed è congiunto al raggio che divampa
 ed è musica nel vento trattenuto
 dalle foreste dense di silenzio:
 e sono stato il capo d'una banda
 pagata a sigarette procurate
 con il grano parlato che rubavo
 dall'umidità della soffitta,
 e quando si combatté sul fiume
 e bisognò attraversare l'acqua
 mi feci trasportare sulle spalle
 perché ero il capo e non il reumatizzato.

La luce ritornava lentamente:
 l'incubo dei negri e marocchini
 che scoperchiavano i tetti delle case
 per la fame solare delle donne
 s'era spostato al nord con la guerra:
 e la forza del coltello tuttofare —
 sguainato dalla lama al cavatappi
 e serrato nella mano che tremava
 all'urlo che saliva dalle scale —
 s'era ridotta a incidere i bastoni:
 e in quell'urlo di donna disperata
 che sguainò il coltello d'un bambino —

*forte soltanto della sua paura
ma deciso nel fondo del suo sangue
a morire tre volte la sua vita
per salvare la purezza di sua madre —
c'era il sangue d'una donna ignota
che piangeva il corpo di suo padre
massacrato sotto un autocarro:
e io sono stato grato a quella morte.*

*La fine della guerra è la sirena
che finalmente urlò per un sospiro
tanto profondo da svegliare le campane:
e alla sera sulla piazza del Comune
con la polvere scavata da ogni bomba
trovata incustodita lungo il fiume
spararono la festa della pace.
Poi cominciò la fiera dei partiti:
dei vecchi distintivi dentro il cesso,
delle sassate contro le sezioni,
degli sfollagente della Celere
e degli altoparlanti arrugginiti
dalla saliva degli uomini sui palchi:
e nacque la Repubblica d'Italia
cantata da una lucida fanfara
e dalla sbornia di qualche muratore:
e solo ora so che in quella fiera
riprendeva il cammino della Storia:
e che la Libertà non è un azzardo
di uomini assopiti nell'angoscia
ma si paga col sangue e con la fede
per un amore che delude sempre
perché il mondo è l'incrocio di più vite
e vi respira anche l'ignoranza
di chi s'affanna a non voler capire
chiuso nel buio della sua fortuna:
ma il vero incontro con la democrazia
io l'ho fatto con l'acciaio delle asce
che distrussero in meno di due mesi
il viale più dolce del paese,
i folti tigli sotto casa mia,*

*dietro sagace ordine del Sindaco
per dare pane ai disoccupati
con un paese da ricostruire;
e nei paesi ci conosciamo bene
e sappiamo chi non ha lavoro
e chi è nato per la muffa dei caffè
anche se ha aggiornato il distintivo.*

*E mi misi a frequentare le sezioni:
nella sezione del Partito Comunista
ho giocato qualche volta a ping-pong,
ed io spiegavo a Mao il mio progetto
di piantare sul Tibet le rose
per i villaggi dell'amore libero;
poi capitai tra i Cristiani Democratici
dove ho gustato il brivido del gioco
nell'azzardo del ramino e settemmezzo,
e alle quattro di ogni pomeriggio
si scendeva da una botola in cantina
per piazzarci con gli occhi forsennati
sulle grate che davano sul corso
per l'uscita delle belle sigaraie —
ed immancabilmente sul più bello
il giovanotto liscio e grassottello
che controllava le entrate della cassa
urlava con tutto il moralismo
che aveva imparato al catechismo
di uscire fuori dalla tentazione,
e poi se capitava un prete grasso
per elevarlo agli occhi di noialtri
diceva che chiavava come un riccio.*

*A quel tempo ero « peccatore »:
calzoni a tubo camicia americana
e vanteria di stragi di pollastre
in pollai del tutto immaginari:
era una mascherata per salvarmi
dal male che mi vietava il sonno
e rotolava uno dopo l'altro
notte eterne e giorni senza fondo:*

*avevo solamente sedicianni
e a sedicianni si prova a dire basta:
ma non mischiamo la musica alle cose:
da due anni non dormivo un'ora
scavato dai soliti dolori;
ed è inutile sparare agli orologi
per uccidere le ore che non passano.*

*Venne giugno e agli esami fui respinto:
e l'estate si spalancò sul vuoto:
le notti senza sonno sono atroci
e il giorno vagavo in bicicletta
cercando di scordarmi dei dolori:
e per trovare un attimo di pace
dovevo fare sempre qualche cosa,
e i compagni di giorno erano al mare
e alla sera passeggiavano per ore
felici delle solite insulsaggini:
fu così che scoprii la sezione
dei « vecchi » di Mazzini e Garibaldi:
ricordo quelle sere con rimpianto,
quelle sere trascorse sul biliardo
a giocare una partita in quattro
e studiare bocchetta per bocchetta
e bagnarsi la camicia di sudore
per vincere una birra o un quarto bianco,
e intorno c'era un pubblico pulito
— ignaro dei lazzi adolescenti —
attento come a un rito quasi sacro:
era gente col senso dell'onore,
erano adulti tornati dal lavoro:
e tutti mi trattarono da pari.*

*E nella calda età dei sedicianni
abbiamo abbandonato Chiaravalle —
con la casa e i ricordi troppo vivi
e la verde festa dei biliardi —
per trasferirci nella straniera Jesi,
senza biliardi e con strade vuote*

*fuorché d'un dialetto sibilante
pieno di riso con dentro gli ossi e i sassi
e orgoglioso di decrepite muraglie
nate nei tempi degli imperatori
ed ora invase dall'erba dei conigli —
e qui ho vissuto lontano dalla gente
finché non venne a farmi compagnia
l'ultima ricaduta del mio male.*

*E quando ho fuggito il letto odiato
sono uscito nel mondo della gente
sconvolto dal rumore d'ogni auto
ubriaco del mistero delle strade,
teatro d'una storia sconosciuta:
e ho dovuto imparare a stare solo:
per una lunga estate senza sole
sono uscito di casa col terrore,
e per tutto il gelo d'un inverno
ho viaggiato col calore d'un coltello:
fu il tempo ossessivo delle fughe
delle fughe covate giorno e notte:
riformato in anticipo
sono andato alla visita di leva
e ho contemplato i prossimi guerrieri:
ho coperto la furia del ventricolo
col cipiglio incrociato delle braccia:
lo dico con dolore: ero il più forte:
una statua trafitta dalla morte:
e ho viaggiato nei vagoni vuoti
dei treni d'ombra, all'ora del meriggio,
e ho accolto il vento tra le labbra
nell'infinito gemito d'un bacio:
dimenticai che la luna è immobile
e mi lasciai guidare sottoporto
nei vicoli affondati nella nebbia:
e il confetto promesso delle nozze
non l'ho messo nella bocca della sposa
ma nel gorgo lanoso
d'un groviglio di carne e di monete:
la chiamavano Ra*

*ma non era una sacerdotessa del sole
e il suo nome carico d'oriente
scontava il balbettio d'un ubriaco:
« Ti chiami Clara? » le chiesi dopo il rito,
oltre l'umile incenso del sapone:
il mare di gennaio varca il porto
e arriva fino ai vicoli, in segreto —
ma il mare è pace in cima alla montagna
e la montagna è un sogno in riva al mare.*

*Non volevo essere un poeta —
ma una volta uscito dalla farsa
del ragazzo sprezzante della morte,
e avere imparato a dominare
senza neppure cercare di capirle
le persone con cui dovevo vivere,
dopo aver scaricato in troppi sogni
tante ore trascorse nel silenzio —
mi sono ritrovato sulla carta
per cercare una figura umana:
ed ero sempre stato tanto umano,
tanto umilmente umano nel mio orgoglio.
Oh non giudicatemi dalla metrica!:
lo confesso: l'ho sempre odiata:
tra canto e luce ho scelto la regina:
la luce fa scoprire terre strane
colme di cose limpide e sgradevoli
e di lune inabissate nella melma:
ma è la luce: è la verità:
e ad amare il grigio quotidiano
c'è tanta verità da rivelare:
ma con la sola verità dell'odio
verso ogni tranquilla riflessione
per scampare al male della noia —
come tanti ragazzi beneducati come me
fecero prima e faranno dopo di me —
ho proclamato il gusto del furore,
della rivoluzione senza scopo
che riceve la paga più felice
quando si accorge d'essere infantile*

e che sconta il buio del suo vuoto
 nell'amarezza di non servire a niente:
 oh vivere per un comune bene
 morire con una fede in bocca,
 col « messaggio » scalfito con le unghie
 sulla spiaggia che il mare uguaglierà!
 Ma non perdiamo la struttura un'altra volta:
 la salvezza è sempre nel racconto:
 e al tempo del mio primo e immenso amore
 nel più sporco bordello di Perugia
 ho pianto nel seno d'una carmen,
 mentre le narravo la mia storia
 di ragazzo tradito e innamorato:
 e lei mi disse dalla fessura d'un sorriso
 che ci sono dolori così grandi
 che s'impara a starsene in silenzio
 e che prima di me sopra quel letto
 aveva amato un uomo disperato
 salito per le scale con le grucce,
 e che il mondo poteva essere mio
 e che dovevo ringraziare Dio
 se una stupida m'aveva abbandonato,
 e che Perugia aveva molte luci
 di cinema caffè sale da ballo
 e che dovevo solo divertirmi
 dimenticare per diventare un altro:
 e c'era solo un grammofoño ad udirla.
 E poco prima avevo la certezza
 che per amare troppo la vita
 avevo conquistato la morte:
 oh la mia morte!, quanto ne ho abusato!:
 l'ho cucinata in tutte le salse
 coniugata in tutti i verbi
 e sfogliata nelle margherite
 al posto degli oracoli d'amore:
 ma la morte è ciò che mi rimane
 quando non ho più niente.
 Ma avevo ventunanni e tanta vita
 e ho danzato nella sagra dell'amore:
 sì, sono entrato nel mondo « finalmente »,

*non voglio uscirne più costi il dolore:
e sempre darò fuoco a questa vita
che ripercorro sopra i versi vani,
ma il cielo non avrà fumo di carta:
e con l'acqua dello scaldabagno
riscaldato con poesie d'amore
mi sono risciacquato per benino —
e ho nascosto i libri tra la polvere
d'una soffitta avida di casse
illuso di nascondervi anche il cuore:
e il giorno dopo son tornato a leggerli
e ho scritto ancora poesie d'amore...*

*Nel tempo di tutti i memoriali,
corro il rischio di essere legato
alle statistiche sull'esibizionismo
come un numero in più per la gran somma:
ma la gioia di queste confessioni
l'ho pagata parola per parola:
ho dovuto gridare per parlare
e ho dovuto crocifiggere il pudore,
un bene che rimpiangerò per sempre —
e recito la mia commedia vera
davanti a un teatro indifferente:
è la mia crudeltà che torna indietro:
nell'infinito battito del mondo
cosa conta il tumulto del mio cuore?:
ora cammino in pace in queste strade
dove ho gustato la poesia della provincia:
e può darsi che un giorno le rimpianga
se il destino mi spingerà lontano:
molto tempo è sceso sul mio cuore
e un'età è volata dai miei occhi:
ma qualcosa è più forte della pace:
lo guardo da dietro la vetrina d'un caffè:
là scorre il mondo dei forti:
loro furono forti per natura
io lo sono diventato per dolore:
sì, sono entrato nel mondo, finalmente —
ma il conto della vincita ritorna?:*

*comunista con gli anticomunisti
anticomunista coi comunisti,
sulla linea Perugia-Foligno
ho fatto quasi senza dolore
un brutale discorso fascista
per l'onore della mia camicia nera
con la bianca cravatta da bullo
e gli occhi svedesi d'una ragazza azzurra
che a Foligno cambiava per Roma:
e son dovuto entrare in cabina
a decidere niente pel mondo
e a crearmi un altro rimorso
per non sapere per chi votare.*

Dove fare la croce copiativa?

*Un anno prima avevo passeggiato
tra i colori di tutti i manifesti
con un anziano amico comunista
capolista del Partito nel paese
che aveva letto tutti i libri di Pavese
(e aveva avuto cioè un'adolescenza
e forse una triste giovinezza
da congiungere al mondo con una fede:
quando una fede aveva il prezzo del confino)
e se io gli indicavo uno striscione
dove era scritto tra martelli e falci
il suo nome di vivo professore
con cinque lauree tanta ribellione
e un sottofondo d'estetica pigrizia,
si difendeva con ironia crudele
che lo faceva avvicinare a un frate
e trasportargli un pacco di candele
fino alla quieta porta del convento,
io e lui di lato ed il frate in mezzo
perché « per tutti bisogna avere amore:
pei clericali e per le prostitute
pei guerrieri e pei geni del villaggio » —
ed ora stanco tra partenze e arrivi
mi parlava di Giacomo Leopardi*

*e che solo tra noi poteva nascere,
noi marchigiani: i russi dell'Italia.*

*E ho ascoltato un po' tutti i comizi:
e le vuote invettive dei fascisti;
e ho visto i battimani dei pretini
scesi dai monti con le confraternite
pel discorso d'un cristiano pezzogrosso,
tutti accaldati nelle scollature
delle ragazze del comizio dopo:
quando il filo della luce si spezzò
e la piazza ed il teatro aperto
s'illuminarono di torce di giornali
e fu cantata « bandiera rossa »:
ed era un urlo rauco di rancore.*

Dove fare la croce copiativa?

*Trovarei un nuovo fiato per gridare
che civiltà significa progresso,
ma oggi come al tempo delle orde
civiltà significa potenza:
basta aprire la finestra d'un giornale
per vedere questo splendido paesaggio —
e se l'occhio si solleva dal giornale
lo assale una sequenza quotidiana
di primi piani sui tavoli dei bar,
di mezzi busti sopra il piano bianco
di tovaglie colorate di molliche,
e panoramiche di viaggiatori stanchi
serrati in un vagone da un destino
appoggiato sul portabagagli:
e in quelle reticelle appese in alto
son resi uguali i cuori più distanti:
e la povera cassetta d'un corriere
giace accanto alla valigia d'un dottore
e i pacchi d'una vecchia contadina
appoggiano le rughe della carta
sulla borsa d'una signorina:
e la colonna sonora è sempre uguale:*

*« la lotta per la vita non ha soste »;
 e tra coloro che hanno i miei vestiti
 vige la legge dello scontento fisso:
 democrazia è il nemico immenso
 e al tempo degli odiati manganelli
 non cigolava la porta delle scale
 le fogne funzionavano a dovere
 gli uffici aprivano in orario
 e le tasse, oh le tasse, Gesù le tasse...
 e l'Italia era una nazione rispettata
 nello spettacolo del mondo...
 No, io non voglio essere dei loro!:
 ma dove andare per non essere dei loro
 se il mondo resta eternamente uguale
 dominato dal dio degli interessi
 sotto ogni tetto dietro ogni portone? —
 e se devo per la dignità di vivere
 continuare a tradirli ogni momento
 per chi lo faccio oltre che per me?:*

*e in tanta nebbia salvo la mia anima.
 E ho votato per mio padre —
 libero professionista indipendente
 nella lista slavata del Partito Liberale:
 sapevo che non sarebbero arrivati a un seggio,
 ma ho votato per lui perché è mio padre
 e ha tagliato la vita a grandi fette:
 ho votato per la sua ferocia di titano
 impoetico e piccolo-borghese
 che ha lottato prodotto e costruito:
 e vuol difendere ciò che ha conquistato
 — malgrado un mare d'amarozze —
 per lasciare il benessere ad un figlio
 perduto in troppe sottigliezze:
 gli ho votato perché aveva tutti contro:
 dal movimento immenso della Storia
 ai battiti segreti del mio cuore.*

*E ho rimandato a domani
 la certezza d'un nuovo dolore —
 e sono salito sul tetto a prendere il sole:*

*il sole incendiava il paese
e il cielo invadeva i cervelli
al sicuro dal bene e dal male
a passeggio per le strade
o sulle poltrone dei caffè
con l'aperitivo amaro come la maldicenza
necessaria per non morire di noia,
e nell'azzurro d'un girovago aeroplano
bruciava i manifesti dei « votate »
che i monelli aspettavano in terra
per festeggiarli in un fuoco d'indiani.*

*E il sole che ardeva un paese in calore
purificava d'ogni dolore il mio vivo rimorso:
e disteso sul tetto di lastre rosso,
il mio corpo senza più cuore
ha fischiato la vecchia canzone
di chi è felice d'essere al mondo.*

(1957)

BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI

NUOVE POESIE

SU UNA FOTOGRAFIA

*Che voglia di scappare via
da Roma, senza dir niente
in famiglia e alla gente
che mi saluta per via,
se scopro che cosa muta
sulle gote e nella pupilla
di mia madre — come brilla
e arde la figura seduta
felice ed obbediente, della bruna
giovane in una fotografia!*

*Perdonami, se sai amare le viltà
di tuo figlio, intento a soffrire
a voce alta, per farsi sentire.*

DIETRO A UNA RAGAZZA

*Parmigiana giovane e alta
di camminare mai stanca*

*sei l'allodola e sei la bianca
mezzaluna di smalto in fondo all'unghia.*

*Già la rosa svapora in uno screzio
caldo, ma pare
che il gioco debba ancora continuare
ingenuo e disperato, come un vizio.*

*Quanta violenza e quanto amore
se bruscamente ti arresti! Non senti?
Si scivola nella sera, nel languore,
morbidamente.*

*La mia presenza per infiniti
secondi, come per infiniti
battiti, ha incrinato appena
il più dolce ed azzurro dei tuoi viaggi:*

*ormai mi perdo negli umidi passaggi
che inventi tra i girasoli marciti.*

STRANO AMORE

*Sussurra l'amorosa, l'amara, l'incantata,
raccolgie ninnoli verdi, nell'ombra fini pendenti.
Così ci si scopre, inquieti e tremanti,
nell'aia, nel silenzio intonacato.*

*Come se fosse sola tra sé parla
e mentre si allontana ansima ancora.
Per la sua voce stupita, per la svelta andatura
è più dolce lasciarla che incontrarla.*

AMORE

*Ogni pioppo che ci accoglie, ogni olmo
conserva del tuo riso il lungo brivido.*

*Se questa sera l'aria punge il viso e le mani
non far caso allo stupore dei tulipani*

*una notte partirò alla scoperta del tuo corpo
la stagione si approssima, le nuvole incontro alle nuvole*

*un nome che è un grido e più caldo del fieno
il caldo addormentarsi delle mie labbra sul tuo seno.*

*Ogni olmo che ci ha covato, ogni pioppo ha serbato
l'affannosa paralisi dell'animale acquattato.*

ROSSANA OMBRES

LE PORTULACHE

*Colori da uccelli canari,
avevano le portulache: mai viste fiorire
se non in Piemonte, e a quel tempo.*

*Vicino alle grandi corone da morto
facevano ridere, le portulache.
Avevi detto: « ...faccia a tempo a venire
il Giovanni, da Ostiglia. E mettete
sul giornale, che ho una figlia già nonna... »*

*Ti guardo fino agli ultimi giorni,
fare i rotoli delle monete; curare
nelle ore morte del dopopranzo
le tue belle teste d'anguria:
morire per te fu soltanto
disertare il negozio e l'orto.*

*Allora io godevo d'essere d'una razza
così longeva: contavo la tua rara
montagna di tempo — novantatre anni —
e mi scottavano i muscoli
come a un cavallo che sta per vincere la gara.*

*E così, quel mattino, non mi passò per la mente
che c'era da far più fatica,
a portarsi un terribile Dio fino all'ultima rampa*

*Portulache strappate di fretta
dai vasi del retrobottega
cascarono impure di terra
sul tuo desertico volto semita.*

SO IL PIEMONTE

*La mia gente corregge adesso
il caffè con la grappa. Fuori,
la Dora dà un salto: e nella corona
del cavalcavia, sfoga
il suo bollore d'autunno.*

*Ci scommetto che Cina ha già messo
in solaio a grinzire le mele;
e nella stalla già insistono
chiacchiere divise per sesso.*

*È adesso, che del Piemonte
io so tutto.*

*So come rampica rossa alle foglie
la morte incompiuta;*

*e che ha stanchezza amorosa di donna
l'ultimo ammasso di bionda
uva non ancora premuta.*

STRADONE

*Insiste, l'estate. Cicale
nel circolo d'afa
iniiettano un siero continuo.*

*A lente palate
un uomo distese il catrame.*

*Il catrame salì pesante per le narici
invase l'alvo delle immagini,
nero s'ammassò inerte. Quell'uomo
lo prese come un certo tipo di pace.*

*Ma un mare feroce d'odore, era;
anche lo sguardo prima preciso,
dentro al gorgo vischioso
cominciò ad affannare.*

*A quell'uomo il catrame rimarrà per memoria
dei suoi giorni di bestia.*

*Per il suo tempo d'angelo
c'è invece il bianco del pane.*

CARTOLINA DA GIAROLE

Qui, le ferie di scuola.

*A mangiare anitre e cardi,
a far baldoria — certe ventilate
sere di vendemmia — sotto la frangia
della pesante uva verde.*

*Non si perde con gli anni, l'immagine
dei vecchi che godevano nelle camere
i liberi passi della strada: muri
accaldati d'inverno, radiavano a giugno
ombre come platani, mosse.*

*Appena tempo di calura, e sugli scuri
delle finestre, ogni sera, si raccoglieva
un pugno di farfalle: tra i gocciolanti
salami d'oca sul palco del soffitto
s'allargavano le gialle
zampogne delle zucche.*

*Questo, il paese che m'è arrivato all'ora
di pranzo, su di una cartolina. A guardarlo*

*con avidi occhi di spia,
son io, esiliata in una stia di case balneari
al cospetto d'un mare dove una lustra nave
va via ad ogni spinta di sirena.*

*Io, che non posso più scricchiolare coi piedi scalzi
nelle piastrelle di legno delle stanze:*

*né più pensare d'averti, una volta,
nel gonfio letto delle vacanze!*

SULLA TOMBA D'UNA GIOVANE SUICIDA

*Scelse un campo da pascolo. Si distese
di faccia al sereno.
Nessun uccello puntava al pieno
dell'aria; compatto
era il suo corpo e il ventre
della terra.*

.....

*Scappò serpentina nell'erba
la vampa del sangue.*

*Meglio darla una volta per sempre
alla fresca premura del prato,
che tenersela addosso insistente
giorno per giorno*

e aspettare.

FERNANDO TEMPESTI

NUCCIA

...l'amore è pensiero, la vita è amore,
gli uomini sono fratelli.

MARIO TOBINO

Erano i tempi degli « essenziali », avevo vent'anni e in me tutto avveniva disordinatamente.

Gli « essenziali » si riunivano al bar Vincenzo, lo abitavano per tutto il pomeriggio e spesso anche la sera. Persone non certo uniformi per carattere e formazione, avevano in comune molte cose, la prima e più ovvia era questa frase, che ripetevano spesso: « Ma insomma, l'arte... ».

Le discussioni non venivano né organizzate né ricercate, nascevano a un tratto e apparentemente per caso; e si sviluppavano imprevedibili, appassionate, lunghe di ore; e contagiavano tutti, anche i più induriti a negarne l'importanza. Una fortuna minore avevano i progetti, progetti di manifestazioni, di « azioni »; questi, tranne che nel Carlini, non trovavano mai una rispondenza totale.

Il nome di essenziali era stato scelto all'unanimità: questo vuol dire che qualcuno l'aveva adottato e tutti gli altri avevano preso a usarlo senza fare obiezioni gravi. Di certo convenendo che era qualcosa di più preciso e secco che essenziali (la derivazione di concorrenza era evidente e nessuno la negava); e qualcosa di più nostro. « Nostro » voleva dire nella tradizione della nostra città, così come risulta dai manuali. Senza contare che l'essenza, secondo l'opinione di tutti,

era più vicina all'arte che non l'esistenza, sempre implicata nei faticosi e frastornanti, antimeditativi, rigiri dell'esistere, cioè del vivere. E in questo doveva entrare anche il fatto che quasi nessuno di noi riusciva a procurarsi di che vivere con facilità.

Il Carlini era grassoccio, con una specie di tic che gli torceva la spalla quando rideva, a ritmo con la risata. Era certo il più assiduo e volenteroso. Era stato lui a proporre qualcosa come una divisa: pantaloni e giubbotto, per uomini e donne, di velluto azzurro cupo — il cappello nessuno lo portava. Ma se l'era fatta soltanto lui e un amico che gli andava sempre dietro e non diceva niente.

Il mio disordine, poi, era spiacevole e semplicissimo. Era che non sapevo mai quello che volevo, lo sospettavo soltanto. Perciò andavo avanti a caso, speranzoso e scoraggiato, ma sempre irritato.

Frequentavo il bar Vincenzo e prendevo parte a qualcuna delle discussioni. Mi sforzavo anche per cercare, se fosse possibile, di farmi un'idea dell'arte di cui parlavano. Naturalmente, pur essendoci, fra loro e me, tante cose in comune, non mi consideravo per niente un essenzialista.

Quel pomeriggio di quel giorno ero uscito di casa con l'intenzione di andare al bar. Ma venendo in centro mi ero reso conto che, nello stato d'animo in cui ero, appena entrato mi sarebbe venuto il magone. Allora mi ero messo a camminare per il centro e poi verso la stazione.

Era primavera, già tiepida e senza vento. La guerra era finita da qualche anno. Ma se avessi trovato le strade, lì intorno alla stazione, chiuse e trasformate in parcheggi di carri armati — come le avevo viste tre anni prima — non mi sarei stupito, tanto sentivo la città intorno a me provvisoria e « buttata all'aria ». Ma forse anche questo dipendeva dal mio stato d'animo.

La osservai camminare davanti a me, ma non la riconobbi. Del resto non era facile, dato che non l'avevo mai vista per la strada. La guardai perché, vista così di dietro, sembrava una bella ragazza, anche se piuttosto mal messa. In mano teneva una grossa borsa, più da viaggio che da città.

Per un pezzo le rimasi dietro a pochi metri. Quando le camminai accanto per superarla, dovetti storcere la testa per cercarle la faccia, tanto camminava col collo piegato e guardando per terra.

Ancora non mi ero chiesto chi potesse essere e dove andasse. Quelle domande che ci si fanno quando si cammina soli e si osserva qualcuno, che sono anche pretesti per inventare una storia. La sola cosa che avevo pensato era che la sua faccia fosse abbastanza sciupata. E difatti era così.

Mi guardò con un'espressione di fastidio e disse: « toh! », con una voce appena percettibile e intonata allo sguardo.

Seguitai a guardarla cercando di capire che cosa avesse voluto dire con quella parola. Quando ci stavo rinunciando disse il mio nome e qualcosa che poteva essere: « guarda chi si vede ». Solo allora riconobbi quel suo viso di figliolona, con la pelle chiara e qualche lentiggine, di donna i cui capelli tendono al rosso. Era poco truccata e molto sciupata, per questo non ero riuscito a ravvisarla. Ma rividi con la mente anche le sue gambe, che avevo osservato poco prima mentre le camminavo dietro; delle gambe mediamente lunghe e ben fatte, con una certa pesantezza alle caviglie, una pesantezza emiliana.

— Salve — dissi, senza chiamarla per nome. Mi sembrava che si chiamasse Nuccia, ma non volevo sbagliare. Chissà dove diavolo andava a quell'ora, in direzione opposta alla stazione con quella grossa borsa in mano.

— Salve — rispose lei, con un tono che poteva anche essere conclusivo.

Si camminava su una strada lunga e dritta, che da quella parte sarebbe sboccata su un viale alberato.

— Vuoi che porti un po' cotesta borsa? — domandai per dire qualcosa, ma anche con voglia sincera di aiutarla.

— Grazie, sei gentile, — disse passandomene i manici, che le avevano tumefatto e segnato di rosso l'interno della mano.

— Da che parte vai? — domandai ancora.

— Di qua, — disse dopo aver fissato la strada davanti a sé come per riconoscerla.

Da quella parte, al dilà del viale, c'era tutto un rione; forse andava a casa di qualcuno, ma ne dubitavo, per quello che sapevo di lei.

— Benissimo — risposi. E dopo un altro silenzio: — Da principio non ti avevo riconosciuta.

Mi guardò con un'espressione molto simile a quando poco prima le cercavo il volto per sola curiosità.

— Dipende... — attaccai. Ma mi fermai subito. Da che

cosa dipendeva era chiaro; ma era anche molto stupido stare a dirlo: — Dipende che qualche volta uno è distratto, guarda la gente in faccia, ma è come se non la vedesse, — dissi correggendomi.

— Deve essere così, — rispose Nuccia, che di certo aveva capito tutte le parole che avevo scansato col mio rigiro. Ormai ero sicuro che Nuccia era il suo nome.

— Sono contento di vederti, — dissi, rispondendo a caso a un qualche suo pensiero che pensavo probabile.

Da quando l'avevo incontrata, qualche momento prima, quella irritazione malinconica che avevo addosso mi stava abbandonando.

Eravamo usciti sul viale e avevamo svoltato verso il giardino pubblico che è da quelle parti.

— Andiamo a sederci su una panchina; ti va? — domandò Nuccia.

— Sì, sì, — risposi.

— Sono stanca — disse; — stiamo un po' seduti e poi tu vai dalla tua parte e io dalla mia.

— Va bene — risposi. Era chiaro che dove sarebbe andata non lo voleva dire.

II

Ai margini di uno spiazzo semicircolare, con davanti un giardino di fiori esotici, già rigogliosi e di colori violenti, con in mezzo il monumento e un qualche re Vittorio Emanuele, ci sedemmo su una panchina.

Appoggiai una mano sulla spalla di Nuccia. Sembrava del tutto occupata a guardare la gente che passava.

L'accarezzavo e sentivo il suo corpo contro il mio fianco. Il sangue mi si andava scaldando. La mia continua irritazione era bisogno di molte cose — miseria, che altro poteva essere? — anche di fare all'amore. E con Nuccia non doveva essere difficile, farlo.

Il suo profumo, anche se non me ne intendevo molto, era piuttosto andante; e stanco, mischiato all'odore naturale del corpo, che aveva un'acutezza che — avevo sentito dire — era particolare alla pelle delle donne coi capelli rossi.

E questo aggiungeva qualcosa al mio desiderio, qualcosa che poteva essere tenerezza.

Il suo viso di ragazzona era fortemente segnato: aveva delle occhiaie, sotto la pelle chiara, di un grigio cinerino. Era molto giù, senza aggressività, forse malata. Anche il rossetto sulle sue labbra era cretato, a chiazze, sfiorito.

I capelli invece li aveva puliti e in ordine, di certo era stata dal parrucchiere ultimamente.

Le accarezzai i capelli. Le dissi « oh », ma dolcemente, per farle voltare gli occhi dalla mia parte. Le sorrisi. Mi rispose con un sorriso che si accese debole e con sforzo, nella zona più ricca di lentiggini del suo volto, fra gli occhi e la bocca.

Non mi aveva detto che stava partendo. E per questo non c'era bisogno di fare tanti misteri. Dunque rimaneva in città. In città non stava lavorando, altrimenti non sarebbe stata in giro a quell'ora e con quella enorme e pesante borsa in mano. Forse doveva cercarsi un qualche posto dove dormire. Per questo avrei potuto aiutarla.

Lo pensavo senza malizia. Al bar capitavano anche due tipi che procacciavano camere ammobiliate; e lo facevano quasi di mestiere. Li avevo sentiti parlare spesso. Una volta avevo accompagnato uno di loro. Perciò conoscevo indirizzi e in certo modo ero accreditato presso quelli che affittavano; veramente presso uno soltanto. Ma non dissi niente di tutto questo.

— È molto che non sei stata a casa? — domandai.

— È un pezzo, — rispose, col tono di non voler continuare quel discorso. E dopo un po': — Ora dobbiamo muoverci, — disse alzandosi in piedi.

Presi da terra la borsa e ci incamminammo.

Quando arrivammo all'angolo di una stada, che dal viale porta verso il centro, si fermò e disse:

— Ora dobbiamo lasciarci. Ti ringrazio molto. Mi ha fatto bene stare un po' su quella panchina.

Quanto mi stava dicendo era la conclusione diretta delle sue parole fino a quel momento. Non avevo immaginato che potesse dire altro. Ma mi prese lo stesso alla sprovvista. Dove mai stava andando, con tanto segreto?

— Senti, — le dissi, su quella cantonata, poggiandole una mano sul braccio, — non so di che cosa tu abbia bisogno; ma se provassi a dirmelo potrei anche vedere di aiutarti. Questo

se lo vuoi tu... E se no... — aggiunsi dopo una pausa, passata in silenzio a guardarci in faccia.

— Non ho bisogno di niente. Sto andando all'ospedale, se ci tieni tanto a saperlo, — rispose.

Questo non mi era passato per la mente. Stava andando all'ospedale e cercava di non farlo sapere. Prima di rispondere credo che mi facessi delle domande, che rimasero tali.

— Tutto qui? — dissi quando aprii bocca, — c'era bisogno di stare a fare tante storie?

Mi guardò in faccia, poco convinta.

— A quale ospedale stai andando?

Mi disse il nome dell'ospedale, sempre guardandomi.

— E volevi arrivare fin là tirandoti dietro questa borsa?

— Ma è da stamani che mi tiro dietro questa borsa, — disse.

— E a che ora devi entrare?

— A una qualche ora. È da stamattina che dovrei, ma non riesco a decidermi.

— Ho capito — dissi, mentre la mia voce si faceva sempre più arbitrariamente autoritaria; mi accorgevo di non sapere per nulla quello che volevo fare e di essere tornato in preda al mio solito disordine.

— Quando ti ho incontrato — disse — ero quasi arrivata alla porta dell'ospedale, ma poi avevo svoltato e mi ero rimessa a camminare come una scema.

— Ora, arrivandoci insieme, sarà tutto più facile, — dissi mentre ci incamminavamo.

Ricominciò il silenzio. L'idea dell'ospedale aveva gelato ogni mio desiderio, mi aveva gettato in un'incertezza senza appigli. Me ne volevo per quella scena insincera che stavo recitando. Una scena che diceva il contrario di quello che sentivo. Avevo voluto sembrare magnanimo, mostrare dei sentimenti nobili e decorativi: giusto il contrario di quello che avevo in cuore.

Nuccia mi camminava accanto. Era una ragazza nei guai, stanca e mal messa; sciupata da far voltare la gente. Di questo poteva anche importarmi poco. Ma che altro mi importava?

Quando arrivammo alla porta dell'ospedale la salutai in fretta. Mi disse: — Allora verrai a trovarmi?

Lo chiedeva con una semplicità così disarmata che le dissi: « sì, sì »; ma pensavo che non l'avrei fatto mai.

III

Passarono alcuni giorni. I soliti della mia vita di quei tempi.

Mia sorella si alzava la mattina e usciva per andare in ufficio sbattendo la porta. E non aveva tutti i torti, di farlo.

In casa mia non avrebbero dovuto nascere femmine, siamo troppo brutti, fatti in una maniera che le donne riescono gialle e viriloidi, tenere di sentimenti e facili all'ira. Di certo a questo mia sorella ci badava, le ci facevano badare; e da questo derivava il suo cattivo carattere. Senza contare che era l'unica di tre fratelli che lavorava e prendeva un regolare stipendio.

Mio fratello stava per laurearsi in medicina. Ed io, in quei tempi, facevo il primo anno di legge. Mia madre era rimasta presto vedova di un piccolo funzionario, che era nostro padre. Una donna verbosa e noiosa, che continuamente aumentava in casa il disagio derivante dal dover vivere con i pochi soldi della pensione di mio padre e dello stipendio di mia sorella, che aveva quel pessimo carattere che ho detto.

In una situazione così impostata la nostra era una casa da starci poco e poco allegri. E io, difatti, in casa ci stavo il meno possibile.

Ma anche all'università ci andavo il meno possibile, perché non mi piaceva l'ambiente.

Non che mi dessero noia perché ero matricola. Di questo non c'era pericolo: ero già un ragazzo robusto, di media statura, ma tarchiato e muscoloso; e disposto a dare poche confidenze. Senza contare la mia faccia, che in questo caso mi serviva egregiamente.

La mia è una faccia che mi fa assomigliare a un mangiabambini, di quelli che si è imparato a conoscere sui manifesti fascisti durante la guerra e poi su quelli anticomunisti durante le elezioni. La faccia di un soldato russo immaginata da quei disegnatori e ordinatori di manifesti. È per questo che mi chiamano il Bolscevico, soprannome che rispecchia anche il mio indirizzo ideologico.

Non per timore di violenze, dunque, capitavo il meno possibile all'università. Era per ragioni più complesse. Intanto, dei due elementi più vistosi che caratterizzavano colleghi e colleghe: il censo e la sgobboneria: non ne possedevo nessuno

dei due. E il culto, in alcuni cinico e in altri ottuso, dei professori, di tutti e specialmente di quelli meno intelligenti, mi dava una reale paura e una insopportabile sofferenza. C'erano, è vero, dei colleghi che non facevano nulla, ma erano così astratti e pedanti, nel ripetere le frasi che giustificavano la loro pigrizia mentale, così nervosamente preoccupati di proclamarle, che la loro compagnia mi gettava regolarmente nell'angoscia. Per tutte queste cose insieme, cercavo di fare quello che dovevo e frequentavo il meno possibile.

La mia non era una vera opposizione, anche se solo psicologica, ripensandoci ora vedo che era un incerto scansare; e l'incertezza derivava, ancora, da quel mio tale disordine. Ad ogni modo, anche per il bene della mia anima, il tempo libero preferivo passarlo al bar, oppure girando per la città.

Il bar Vincenzo era in una via del centro, vicino al mercato. Oltre agli essenzialisti, con i quali, ora devo ammetterlo, non avevo in comune soltanto il disordine, ma anche la volontà di uscirne, senza dire la fondamentale buona fede e la fraternità nell'essere in prevalenza squattrinati; oltre a questi, ci capitavano gente di vari mestieri e senza mestiere, delle prostitute girovaghe e alcuni stranieri. Del resto, lasciando stare la divisa che la portavano soltanto in due, non era possibile riconoscere un essenzialista da uno che non lo era: e questo, visto a distanza, mi pare un merito.

Il locale non era fiorente. Ci si stava molto e ci si spendeva poco. Vincenzo, un napoletano che esteriormente aveva preso molti dei nostri modi, aveva continuamente e netta l'impressione di navigare in cattive acque. E il cupo nervosismo che gliene derivava, gli faceva ogni tanto fare di quelle scene che mostravano l'ironia della sua disperazione. Erano cose che a chi non lo conosceva apparivano soltanto assurde.

Entrava uno sconosciuto, un cliente occasionale del bar. Chiedeva un caffè.

— Lei vuole un caffè — diceva Vincenzo —; dia retta a me: vada a prenderlo qui accanto, lo fanno meglio. Non posso mica stare a fare un caffè a lei. Ho troppe cambiali che mi scadono. Un caffè non risolve nulla.

Questa era una scena che si ripeteva abbastanza spesso. Il Tizio che era stato trattato così, di solito se ne andava. Era stato offeso, ma in quella maniera ambigua, che suscita dubbi

e sgradevoli pensieri: la maniera di offendere che ha la miseria, quando non si accorge, in questo modo, di offendere anche se stessa.

In quei giorni, dopo che avevo incontrato Nuccia e l'avevo salutata alla porta dell'ospedale, passai molte ore al bar. Quando taceva la discussione, le facce lunghe e immusonite prevalevano. Non si vedeva più neanche Biancaneve. Mi accorsi che era sparito da un paio di settimane.

Biancaneve era diventato amico mio un giorno che avevo detto: — La questione razziale? Non esiste. Basta non impostarla.

Era un pensiero non molto elaborato, ma esprimeva bene i miei sentimenti, oltre alle convinzioni; e lui lo apprezzò.

Il professor H. P., professore di filosofia e maggiore della brigata Buffalo, era un negro di fattezze colossali. Era anche uno dei migliori clienti del bar Vincenzo, dato che ci faceva colazione a vasetti di iogurt e bomboloni; e ne consumava in tutto una ventina di pezzi per volta, uno via l'altro. I vasetti di iogurt non li vuotava col cucchiaino, ma li beveva.

Secondo me era un uomo intelligente; oltre che un uomo sensibile, sempre teso a cogliere le più sottili sfumature delle voci e dei gesti delle persone che osservava. Ma anche delle parole, dato che l'italiano l'aveva imparato molto bene.

Quella sua continua tensione psicologica, del resto ben dissimulata sotto un complesso formalismo di modi, rendeva gustoso e imprevedibile tutto quello che diceva. Per queste caratteristiche lo si poteva considerare un narratore nato; e avendo anche letto molto raccontava bene e con passione. Mi piaceva starlo a sentire quando ricostruiva, con osservazioni staccate, attente quasi soltanto agli uomini e alle radici dei loro pensieri, le scene di guerra che aveva conosciuto. Una in particolare, mi torna sempre in mente, quando ricordo la sua persona.

Qualcuno aveva cominciato a sparargli — in una strada di Viareggio, alla periferia, fra quegli ampi isolati deserti; un giorno, quando i combattimenti in quella zona erano finiti.

Al primo colpo si era voltato e aveva visto per un attimo, nella scarsa luce, la faccia di quello che gli sparava — era di sera.

Biancaneve era lungo un muro che non offriva riparo agli spari che venivano in direzione della strada.

Era armato, ma per sparare doveva cercarsi un riparo, doveva raggiungere lo spigolo di un isolato, un angolo della strada.

L'impulso fu di correre, ma continuò a camminare misurando i suoi passi. Quegli spari, che l'avevano colto mentre andava in giro con i suoi pensieri, che si muovevano lontani dalla guerra, si inserirono in essi come una provocazione personale alla sua dignità di uomo negro, più che come un pericolo fisico.

E a quella provocazione aveva risposto — sino all'angolo, quando aveva sparato — col suo passo che esprimeva disprezzo e dominio della paura.

Dopo la guerra Biancaneve era rimasto in Italia. Faceva l'istruttore di basket in una palestra della nostra città.

Qualche volta lo andavo a trovare a casa insieme a una pittrice americana, che avevo conosciuto al bar Vincenzo in sua compagnia. Biancaneve abitava in una camera d'affitto, che in parte aveva adattata alle sue abitudini. Ci sedevamo sul sofà e lui si stendeva sull'amaca, che gli serviva anche da letto. Raccontava storie e mangiava fichi secchi in continuazione, esaltandone, per inciso, le grandi virtù nutritive e esortandoci a mangiarne molti anche noi. Nel loro genere erano delle belle serate.

Maddalena era una pittrice magra, sui trentacinque. Non si poteva dire né brutta né di carattere spiacevole, ma dire il contrario era difficoltoso. Aveva degli atteggiamenti che ho sempre considerato parigini. Fra di noi c'era della tenerezza, mista a diffidenza psicologica. Ci stavo insieme molto volentieri e lei diceva di essere innamorata dei miei occhi verdi, quegli occhi che secondo altri contribuiscono a inferocire la mia già, a prima vista, feroce fisionomia. Era una donna di una sensualità che chiamerei tiepida e volenterosa, rispettosa dei sentimentalismi, anche di quelli meno rispettabili: tutte cose che si trovavano anche nei suoi quadri. E nelle sue piccole depravazioni mostrava ancora questi caratteri di fondo e lo scarso vigore della sua fantasia erotica.

Maddalena era tornata in America un sei mesi prima di quella primavera che incontrai Nuccia per la strada.

IV

Era passata ormai una settimana. Una settimana più di ogni altra piena di quei miei tali disordini del volere e non volere. Quando mi decisi ad andare da Nuccia.

All'ultimo momento c'era l'inconveniente che non conoscevo il suo cognome. Senza quello non potevo domandare indicazioni a nessuno.

Ci andai al « passo » e cominciai a girare per l'ospedale, cercando di farlo con un certo ordine; e fingendo, con la decisione del camminare, di sapere benissimo dove ero diretto.

Un ospedale assomiglia molto a una caserma. È un'impresione che deriva da vari elementi: dall'avere un'organizzazione fissa valida soltanto all'interno delle proprie mura; dall'esserci un personale che si muove indaffarato e padrone della situazione e della gente che aspetta, che guarda fisso e aspetta.

Per trovare Nuccia mi ci volle più di quanto avessi immaginato.

La trovai in una camera piccola e stretta dove c'erano soltanto otto letti. La riconobbi dai capelli. Il suo era l'ultimo letto della fila. Stava voltata con la faccia contro il muro. Era sola.

Soltanto allora, mentre mi avvicinavo per salutarla, mi accorsi di avere le mani vuote, come nessuno delle tante persone in visita che avevo incontrato nei corridoi. Non mi era neanche venuto in mente, di portarle qualcosa da offrirle.

Ormai si doveva essere convinta che non ci sarei mai andato a trovarla, perché al vedermi fu molto stupita. Mi sembrò anche che arrossisse, mentre le stringevo la mano e cercavo qualcosa da dire.

Il suo viso, riposato e senza trucco, aveva recuperato freschezza, anche se di quella freschezza ambigua che viene stando in letto. Difatti era ancora molto pallida.

— Come stai? — dissi alla fine, come avevo già detto salutandola.

— Ormai non ti aspettavo più, — rispose, con una voce dove c'era dell'ostilità. Né volle che le dicessi perché in tutti quei giorni non mi ero fatto vivo.

Le domandai cosa avevano detto, quanto aveva ancora da rimanere lì.

Rispose che doveva restarci una quindicina di giorni, ma una settimana era già passata.

Quando, dopo poco, si era fatta l'ora di uscire, mi domandò se sarei tornato.

— Certo che tornerò — risposi. E di seguito: — Dovresti dirmi se hai bisogno di qualcosa, di qualcosa che posso portarti da fuori.

— Sì — disse — portami dello zucchero. Lo zucchero è sempre poco.

Il giorno dopo ero lì al « passo » del pomeriggio. Avevo in mano un pacchetto di zucchero, un fagottino con una manciata di zollette, che avevo preso in casa e incartato con cura. Se se ne fosse accorta mia sorella mi avrebbe fatto una di quelle scenate che faceva lei: di poche parole e di molta violenza. Ma in quel momento non pensavo a mia sorella. Fuori avevo comprato anche un pacchetto di biscotti.

Quel giorno Nuccia volle che mi sedessi sul letto e le tenessi la mano. Parlò anche a lungo, di cose minute che riguardavano i fatti e le persone dell'ospedale. Parlava esitando sulle parole e ricorrendo spesso al suo gergo. Ogni tanto diceva qualcosa con la sua vicina di letto, che era una ragazza magra con un gran naso, che per caso quel giorno non aveva nessuno a trovarla.

Ascoltavo e cercavo di interessarmi a tutte quelle cose. Tornai a trovarla ogni pomeriggio. Non avrei saputo dire chiaramente perché seguitavo ad andarci, questo era il mio disordine.

Nuccia mi disse qual era la sua malattia. Era una malattia grave, ma guaribile, o per lo meno da mettere in condizioni di non nuocere.

Quando l'avevo incontrata per la strada, ecc., l'atteggiamento di Nuccia nei confronti della malattia era questo: se ne vergognava profondamente; la sentiva come un'offesa subita, un'offesa umiliante e inconfessabile. Da quando l'avevo rivista in ospedale invece ne parlava con disprezzo. E con lo stesso disprezzo parlava di ogni malattia, anche di quelle delle vicine di letto. E il suo era un disprezzo attivo, col quale riusciva a vincere la tetraggine del luogo, quell'aria di caserma e di attesa sofferente, quel clima di manierate speranze e di disperazione. Certe sue risate, che mi colpivano piacevolmente

e mi lasciavano nello stupore, certi suoi toni di intesa, sono convinto che nascevano da questo.

Una volta, mentre ci salutavamo, disse: — Ho una gran voglia di fare all'amore.

Le risposi che quello, per fare all'amore, non mi sembrava il luogo più adatto.

Un giorno andai a trovarla fuori « passo ». Le tende della finestra della piccola camerata erano abbassate; e nella penombra le altre donne stavano sonnecchiando. La vicina di letto, quella ragazza magra con un grande naso, era andata via e il posto era rimasto libero. Nuccia era in uno stato di insolita agitazione, le sue guance erano più colorite. Non ricordo se era stata proprio lei a chiedermi di andarci a quell'ora fuori orario.

— Accarezzami — disse dopo le prime battute, che anch'esse riflettevano il suo stato d'animo.

Aveva dei grossi seni, un po' pesanti, ma forti, bianchi, di ragazzona tendente al rosso. Cominciai e smisi subito. Era troppo grottesco, in quel luogo, mettersi in testa di fare certe cose. Per me, non per lei; per lei questo faceva parte del suo disprezzo.

Un'altra volta mi accolse dicendo: — Le altre donne mi hanno domandato chi eri. Ho detto che eri il mio fidanzato. Non ti dispiace mica?

Risposi che poteva dire tutto quello che le faceva piacere.

Nuccia andava rifiorendo, rimettendosi rapidamente. Ogni giorno la sentivo più sicura di se stessa.

— Era una brutta malattia, ma ora è guarita e posso fare all'amore con chi voglio, — disse tornando su questo argomento. — Se non ci credi puoi domandarlo al dottore, — aveva aggiunto.

Ma le credevo.

Nuccia stava veramente guarendo. Tuttavia aveva sentito dire che le sarebbe stata utile una cura speciale che non le facevano. Di questa me ne parlò un paio di volte.

— Bisognerebbe che la chiedessi al direttore dell'ospedale quando passa per la visita, — disse anche, — ma mi vergogno. Preferisco scrivergli una lettera.

Le risposi che era una cosa che doveva fare. — La scrivo domattina, poi te la faccio leggere e tu la correggi — disse.

Risposi di sì; anche se quell'incarico di grammatico non mi piaceva per niente; mi metteva anzi piuttosto a disagio.

Il giorno dopo mi porse la lettera che aveva scritto. Non c'era niente da correggere, ogni discorso era coerente e diceva quello che doveva dire. Chiedeva la medicina di cui aveva bisogno e cominciava: « Caro Professore, nel 1946 cominciai a fare la vita e, delicata com'ero, presi subito... » (e qui diceva il nome della malattia).

V

Nuccia fu congedata dall'ospedale un pomeriggio di domenica. Ormai era giugno. Naturalmente andai a prenderla.

Quella sera, non secondo il mio solito, avevo anche due fogli da mille in tasca. Le chiesi di cenare con me in trattoria.

Nuccia, prima di ogni altra cosa, andò a fissare una camera in un albergo-pensione del centro; sarebbe rimasta lì per il tempo che ancora doveva restare in città.

L'albergo aveva un aspetto cupo e umilissimo.

La trattoria, dato che non avevo l'abitudine di mangiare fuori, la conoscevo per sentito dire. La frequentavano molti di quelli che capitavano al bar Vincenzo.

Appena entrati, prima di ogni altro, vidi Biancaneve, che seduto a un tavolo stava mangiando con un fare, in confronto agli altri, elegante e annoiato.

Era una piacevole sorpresa. Fu, quanto me, contento di vedermi e forse, anche, di liberare la sua larga faccia, lucidamente malinconica, da quell'espressione che ci teneva sopra come un dovere mondano. Il formalismo di H. P. era impossibile non ammirarlo, ma qualche volta si aveva l'impressione che ci soffrisse dentro.

Ci stringemmo la mano al passaggio. Squadro Nuccia con l'attenzione avvolgente e dilatata che gli era propria; e cercando di non farsi sentire da lei, che era andata avanti verso un tavolo libero, domandò:

— È per denaro o per piacere?

Questa volta non risposi. L'aspetto di Nuccia rivelava il suo mestiere: era un fatto questo che avevo notato anch'io e in certi momenti mi aveva anche dato un po' noia. Si rivelava attraverso cosa? Questo è più difficile a dirsi: probabilmente

attraverso gli abiti e il modo di muoversi: roba di sfumature, naturalmente; di certo c'entrava anche lo sguardo e il modo di rifinire il trucco del viso, la mancanza di disinvoltura in queste cose. Ma il punto era un altro. Era il formalismo di Biancaneve, che mi offendeva. Notava in Nuccia un'evidente mancanza di classe e l'appartenenza a un mestiere infamante e si affrettava a costatarlo. La sua franchezza non era in discussione, mi ribellavo contro i suoi pregiudizi, contro la puerile grammatica che lo guidava nel giudicare le donne. Lo guardai con antipatia. Non mi piace la gente che crede nelle prime cose che le vengono in testa. Decisi che non era poi così intelligente come credevo. E da quel momento nacque tra noi una freddezza che non è finita più; anche perché dopo poco H. P. è partito e non ci siamo più visti.

Nuccia ed io mangiammo con cordialità e vivace appetito dei cibi abbondanti e economici. Non le dissi nulla del mio scontro psicologico con Biancaneve, che, ora riconosco, aveva avuto il solo torto di esprimere un pensiero ovvio, insolito per la tensione mentale che gli conoscevo. Rientrammo presto in albergo.

Nei giorni che seguirono capii che nell'albergo-pensione fra la vita dei clienti e quella dei padroni non c'era una vera e propria soluzione di continuità. Me ne accorsi una volta che in fondo alle strette scale che stavo scendendo incontrai un vecchio obeso, dall'aria viziosa e la voce acuta e nasale, che mi disse:

— Ha visto che pulizia!?

Ma anche:

— La sua ragazza è un'artista, l'ho visto subito; e lei è un birbone. Birbone!

Preso alla sprovvista rimasi basito. Probabilmente mormorai come un allocco qualche « sì, sì » di risposta. E lui si mise a raccontarmi della gatta che aveva partorito. Ne fece una descrizione crudele e appassionata, non la finiva più di notare particolari, con quel suo linguaggio insinuante e esclamativo.

Questo era il padrone, che si vedeva abbastanza di rado. Al burò ci stava sempre il nipote, che uno dei primi giorni, incontrando il suo sguardo interrogativo e dicendogli io che avevo intenzione di salire dalla signorina del numero X, mi aveva domandato:

— È minorenni?

— Chi, la ragazza? No, no.

— Allora vada. Vada, vada.

Era un giovane più o meno della mia età, che passava le giornate seduto a quel burò con intorno tubetti di colore, pennelli e boccettine per l'acqua ragia. Dipingeva continuamente su delle piccole tele e tavolette, che teneva piatte sul piano del tavolo come se ci scrivesse. Era un giovanotto tarchiato e florido, ma con qualcosa di cupo nella faccia e nei modi. I molti quadretti, appesi un po' dappertutto sui muri dell'albergo, erano i suoi. E quelli, oltre che cupi erano sinistri. Dipingeva pesci: dei pesci imprecisabili, biaccosi e cangianti, alcuni lunghi e sinuosi, altri tozzi e piatti, ma tutti su un fondo verde nero, rappresentante l'abisso. Ci dipingeva insieme delle piante acquatiche, che risultavano, toccate com'erano di venature rosse, più animalesche dei pesci, ma altrettanto sgradevoli.

Un'altra sua predilezione era per i pugnali e le macchie di sangue. Un tema che variava impercettibilmente ed era sempre combinato con gambe di donna, occhi e bande di capelli; oppure con silhouettes di frati, che schizzava ai lati della macchia rossa, ma anche nel mezzo, accanto al grigio della lama.

L'effetto pauroso di questi quadri non dipendeva tanto da quello che rappresentavano; dato che sempre la vernice si mostrava prepotentemente per quello che era, e senza convinzione alludeva a quanto doveva rappresentare; forse non era nemmeno l'ossessiva monotonia dei temi; era la facilità assurda e incontrollata con la quale venivano prodotti e andavano a occupare le pareti del locale, che metteva a disagio.

Queste persone e la loro ambiguità, fra le mura dell'alberghetto, erano lo sfondo delle giornate che passai con Nuccia.

Furono giornate belle e omogenee, nelle quali il disordine cessò di possedermi. I sensi, ma anche l'innocenza di Nuccia e la nostra vita passata le fecero belle.

L'innocenza non aveva niente a che fare con il mestiere di Nuccia, né era un contrappasso di esso. Mi si fece chiaro che l'innocenza non è niente di casuale, e nemmeno di « spontaneo », ma una forza individuale, assolutamente individuale; connessa se mai a tutta la storia di una persona, ma a nessuna parte di essa, al significato di quella storia, alla coscienza che la persona ne ha tratta, non di certo ai fatti. Direi che equivale alla capacità di amare la vita, che è essenzialmente capacità di

scelta, di rottura della solitudine, di resistenza attiva al disordine interno e esterno.

Nuccia era nata in un paesino vicino a Ravenna. Era figlia di un maestro muratore e di una donna di notevole bellezza, che aveva già avuto due figli dallo stesso matrimonio, un maschio e una femmina. Il padre, forse già prima che nascesse, aveva dubbi che la terza figlia non fosse sua. Questi dubbi diventarono presto certezza. E la moglie non fece mai niente di utile per smuovere questa certezza. Col risultato che riuscì a difendere se stessa e la figlia dall'odio del proprio marito solo finché le durò la bellezza, che non durò molto.

Nuccia, praticamente scacciata, lasciò la casa natale piuttosto presto. Girò le città dell'Emilia e Romagna andando a servizio. Verso i diciott'anni ebbe il primo amore impegnativo, andò cioè a letto con un tale, dato che ad altre possibilità di impegno di quell'amore non ci credeva molto.

Da quel tempo la sua vita accelerò di ritmo. Si era fatta una bella ragazza, anche se il suo fisico accennava già una certa tendenza ad appesantirsi. Cambiò un certo numero di innamorati, finché dopo non molto, nell'immediato dopo guerra, si era messa « a fare la vita ».

Questo era lo schema esterno della sua storia, nel quale si era sviluppata quella che io ricordo come la sua innocenza. Quell'innocenza che fu il sapore delle nostre giornate d'amore e che raccontando ho cercato di definire.

Nuccia partì dopo una settimana.

GAIO FRATINI

CINEMA A VAL MELAINA

*Brucia per gli arsi prati
di Val Melaina un lungo
e incredibile nastro di celluloido.*

*Che racconta quaggiù dove la sera
si fa sempre più afosa intorno ai colpi
secchi e accecanti delle bocce in corsa
sui contesi rettangoli?*

*« Il mio amore
è splendido » sospira nella polvere
d'una ballerina il cantante dal rosso
garofano all'occhiello e appena muore
l'empia canzone, disumana esplode
su da un'arena di sconnesse panche
la voce altera d'Elena di Troia.*

*Io dalla parte entrando dello schermo
vedo famiglie dormire sdraiate
sotto un'onda di luce che va e viene,
stagnanti canottiere entro la morsa
d'una estate crudele.*

*Alle battaglie solo
i ragazzi sussultano,
per le briglie vorrebbero tenere*

*quelle lontane immagini fuggenti,
ma già i cavalli invadono leggeri
i loro sogni.*

*E la città ritorna
a bruciare insensibile,
si chiami Roma o Troia.*

('57)

NEL DUEMILA ASPETTANDO UNA RAGAZZA

*Se il tepore infinito d'una doccia
levigherà il mio cuore a fine di partita,
e col passo più lieve, la cravatta di fiamma,
giungendo alla tua porta mi diranno
che tu sei appena uscita,*

*mi siederò per attenderti al bar
di sotto, ma tranquillo e fresco come un albero
che ha preso tanta pioggia.*

*Dovremo amarci in silenzio, così,
come incantati alberi
che da un giardino all'altro
con grida e nomi di fanciulli si chiamano.*

*Amarci saggiamente,
senza più scatti, fughe, nevralgie...
con la mente fermando l'orologio
dalle cifre romane sull'ermo campanile.*

('57)

LETTERA PER LA RIVIERA

*Contro il mare che sale se tu gridi
il nome mio, come potrò risponderti?*

*Al crescente rullio
della sbattuta ghiaia,
teneri luccichii di catrame
insieme a te rivedessi affiorare,
e al largo, a colpi di remo abbattute,
capovolte vaghissime meduse!*

*Amore mio, si vale solamente
di relitti e di forme macerate
il mondo per risplendere?*

*Fossili asterie cerchi per collane
immaginarie tra sugheri e scatolame
d'ancorati yachts. E tu come di queste
un po' antiquate ricchezze sai ridere!*

*Ti sfiorano persino lusinghe
(dall'onde accolte e subito respinte)
di vaganti bottiglie di champagne
che effimere bagnanti sotto un'enfia
luna nuotando bevvero su fragile
e mesta prua d'un regnante in esilio.*

*Per tutta la riviera e la sua estate
crudelmente sincera che determina
il bene e il male e a nudo mette l'anima
e il corpo sotto il sole, che resista
a lungo la tua immagine, o nordica
madre scesa anzitempo col bambino
sulla spiaggia deserta. E lanci in alto
per lui la palla, già ti tuffi, addenti
una susina?*

(57)

MESTIERE D'AVVOCATO

*Tra libri di diritto immaginandomi
gravemente ammalato,
una perduta villa
con tante sdraie e il tennis ho invocato.*

*Io che non chiesi come Plinio schiavi
e cavalli al destino né incarichi importanti,
ma solo la grazia indicibile
di sentirmi innocente e molto fuori
dalla città dei legulei sorriderne,
complice sono invece d'infingardo
cliente e sfoglio per difesa il codice.*

*Così brilla da anni sempre più irraggiungibile
la villa di campagna ove vissi incantevoli
stagioni d'ozio ed altro non sapevo
che scrivere a un amico lontano veramente:*

*« Ho giocato stamani sul campo sdrucchiolevole
per la pioggia invocando un donna e un mestiere... »*

(57)

ASCESA

*Tua madre, in gioventù chiamata
bocca di farfalla,
(il puro indispensabile posandosi
di gerarca in gerarca),*

*« non farai la mia fine! »
ti grida, orrido spettro
che le tue forme lievitanti scruta
tra vapori di sauna. Indi il massaggio,*

*la doccia, il giallo accappatoio, uscirne
con lento studio, in un'intima barca
fanciulletti-pescicoli invitare
per il bagno, onde resta sulla riva
schiumosa rabbia d'uomini e scommesse
— come averti — lingueggiano. Alla voce*

*tu dimagrisci dello spettro, fiocchi
d'avena mordi, una banana, scivola
il rame scintillante del tuo incedere
su un orizzonte d'arrossati addomi.*

*Sono per censo e proprietà i custodi
zelanti di Sodoma, hanno ville
tra i pini su cui nevicano piume
di folgorate quaglie giunte esanguì
dal Cairo. Il loro whisky eterno piove
sul girarrosto, s'incrina l'autunno
di Vivaldi, straziato microsolco.*

*Eccoli i tuoi adulatori: hanno pinguì
e caudate automobili, un bracciale
d'oro dal volgo li distingue e l'arte
latina di invocarti « angelo mio »
senza toccarti. Puntuale, allé cinque,
il matriarcale spettro li costringe
sdraiati e inermi a parlare di cinema.*

*« Un corpo come quello di mia figlia
nemmeno la Bardot... ». Ondeggiante muovi
al trampolino, indugi alacremen-
te per la scaletta, sei un divino ascendere
sul cartellone fiammante del cielo:*

*cercano finte nubi di trascorrere,
il mare — riprodotto — sembra vero.*

('59)

BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

on authors appearing for the first time
in *Botteghe Oscure*

ELISALEX DE BAILLET-LATOURE (1939, *Washington D.C., USA*). Education: Lycée Chateaubriand, Rome and Miss Porter' School, Farmington. Is now completing a course at the Istituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome.

HORST BIENEK (1930, *Gleiwitz/Oberschlesien, Germany*). Arrested in 1951 and sent to Siberia. Returned in 1955 and since 1957 works with the Frankfurt Radio. Publications: *Traumbuch eines Gefangenen*, (both verse and prose).

EDWIN BROCK (1927, *London, England*). Served in the British Pacific Fleet for three years. Afterwards was a journalist, then became a policeman in London. These are his first published poems.

PATRICIA COOMBS (1927, *Los Angeles, California, USA*). Education: De Pauw University, Michigan State College and University of Washington. B.A. and M.A. in English Literature. Studied poetry with Theodore Roethke. Married in 1951, and lives in New York City where she studied poetry with Stanley Kunitz. Has published poems in *Western Review*, *Avon Book of Modern Writing* No 2, *Partisan Review*.

JOHN FANDEL (1925, *Yonkers, New York, USA*) USNR; A. B., and Trinity College, Hartford; A. M. and Middlebury College; is teaching at present at Manhattan College. Poems in various American periodicals, several brochures published; *Testament and other poems* to appear shortly.

MASSIMO FERRETTI (1935, *Chiaravalle, Ancona, Italy*) is preparing for his Doctorate in law at the University of Perugia. Has published two books of verse and is a contributor to the review *Officina*.

GAIO FRATINI (1921, *Città della Pieve, Italy*) is a lawyer, now practising in Rome. In 1952, published *I poeti muoiono*.

ROBERT GITTINGS (1911, *Portsmouth, Hampshire, England*) St. Edward's School, Oxford and Jesus College, Cambridge, became a Fellow of that College. He has published poems: *Wentworth Place* and

Famous Meetings, a play: *The Makers of Violence*, criticism: *John Keats: The Living Year* and *The Mask of Keats*. Works for the BBC.

DUDLEY HUPPLER (1917, *Muscoda, Wisconsin, USA*) studied English Literature and Art History at the University of Wisconsin, gave it all up, just this side of the Doctorate, to become an artist. Privately published: *The Lesson Book*. Libretti for composer Lee Hoiby, one of which, *Leintraub as Circe*, awaits production in America.

JEAN LAUDE (1922, *Dunkerque, France*) publications: *Le grand Passage, Point d'amure*. He contributes to many important periodicals and reviews and is preparing a Doctorate on *Rencontres des arts nègro-africains et des arts modernes*; an essay on travel, a study on the sculpture of Jacobsen and a new collection of poems.

JANE MAYHALL (1921, *Louisville, Kentucky, USA*) studied at the New School for Social Research in New York and at the Longy Music School, Cambridge. Has had work published in *New Directions*, *Best American Short Stories* and many reviews and periodicals.

CRISTOPH MECKEL (1935, *Berlin, Germany*) studied painting in Munich and Paris, has travelled in Italy, France and Greece. Publications: two books of poems (*Tarnkappe* and *Hotel für Schlafwandler*) and prose and verse in numerous periodicals and anthologies.

IRA MOTHNER (1932, *Brooklyn, N.Y., USA*) graduated at the University of Missouri, served in Korea, and studied as a GI student in Paris at the Sorbonne. Extensive travel in Western Europe. This is his first published story.

ROSSANA OMBRES (1931, *Torino, Italy*) studied philosophy in Turin, spent many years in Naples and lives now in Rome. In 1956 published *Orizzonte anche tu*.

LUCIEN SCHELER (1902, *Cassel, Germany, French naturalized*) B.A. of Sorbonne University. Antiquarian bookseller specialising in the literature of the XVIth and XVIIth centuries. Has discovered and published an unknown text by Rabelais and a revised, complete edition of Rabelais' works. Published an anthology of the works of Jean-Paul Marat, edited works by Laménais and also by Flora Tristan. Has contributed to clandestine publications during the Occupation and published several collections of his poems.

RICHARD SELIG (1929-1957, *New York City*) graduated at the University of Washington, Seattle. During his college days was at intervals picture frame maker, woodworking mechanic, actor, stoker and teacher. He spent three years in Oxford as a Rhodes scholar. His poems were published in *Encounter*, *Botteghe Oscure* and many other important reviews. He died at the age of 28.

EDITH SHIFFERT (1918, *Toronto, Canada*) University of Washington for three years and has recently been working on verse writing under Theodore Roethke and Nelson Bentley. Is continuing Far Eastern studies, was published in Japan an experimental work on part of the Japanese *Kojiki* and is the Far Eastern editor for *Poetry Northwest*.

C. H. SISSON (1914, *Bristol, England*) educated at Bristol University and Berlin, Freiburg and Sorbonne Universities. Works in the British Civil Service. Published *An Asiatic Romance, Versions and Perversions of Heine* and is a contributor to various periodicals.

FERNANDO TEMPESTI. Born 1930 at Tavarnuzze near Florence. His family moved to the city in 1932. Studied under Roberto Longhi and graduated in 1954. During the war he worked sporadically as a labourer and a farmer. For the past fourteen years, following in his father's footsteps, he has sold fruit at the market, in Florence, where he lives. He was first published in «Paragone» the revue of Anna Banti. Since he has been published in «Il Nuovo Corriere» the weekly edited by Romano Bilenchi.

DIEGO VALERI (1887, *Piove di Sacco, Padova, Italy*) is teaching French Literature at the University of Padua and also Italian modern and contemporary Literature. His more important publications: *Saggi e note di letteratura francese moderna, Tempo che muore, Terzo tempo*. Lives in Venice and is a regular contributor to many important Italian periodicals. Has received recently the Taormina international award of Poetry.

MARTIN WALSER (1927, *Wasserburg, Germany*) published a collection of short stories: *Ein Flugzeug über dem Haus* and a novel, *Ehen in Philippsburg*. Has received two literary prizes.

FRANZ WURM (1926, *Prague, Czechoslovakia*) lived in England, studied modern languages at Oxford. Now lives in Zurich.

We regret to announce that our eminent collaborator, Rudolf Kassner, died at Sierre (Switzerland) on April 1st 1959.

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